

FEBRUARY 2015

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the Robo-Bulls  
and Zombie  
Dancers**  
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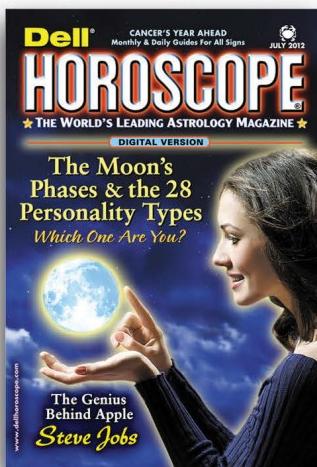
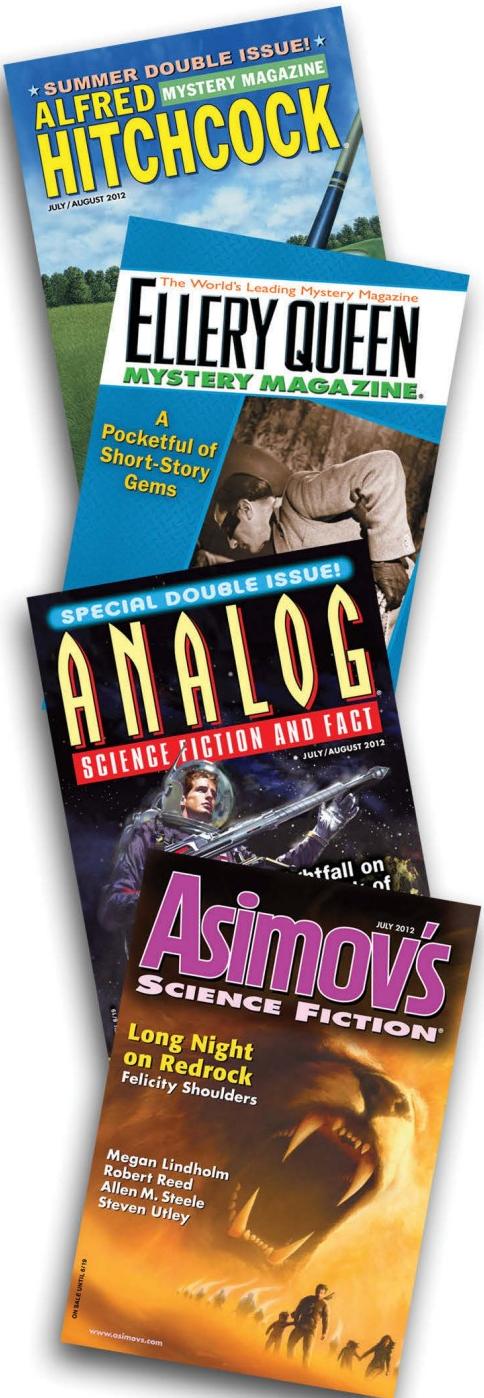


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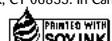
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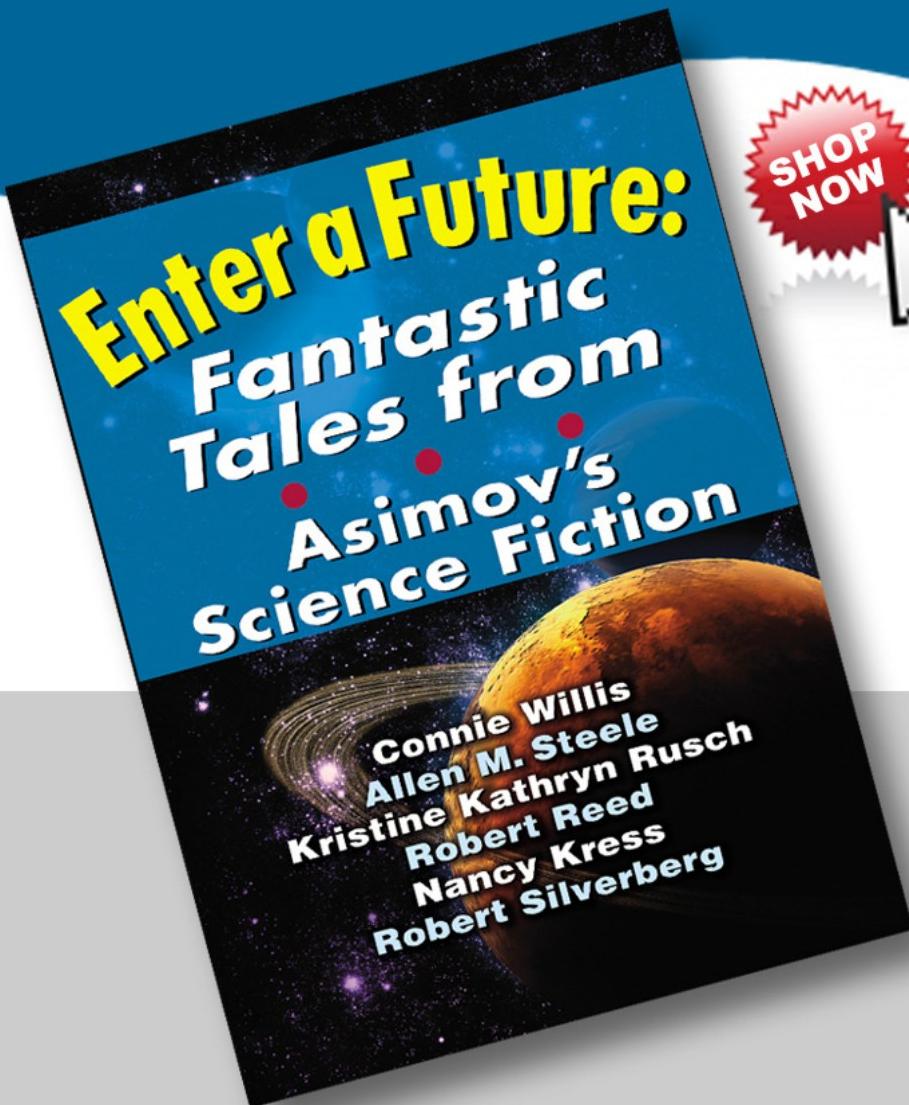
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Asimov's Science Fiction. ISSN 1065-2698. Vol. 39, No. 2, Whole No. 469, February 2015. GST #R123293128. Published monthly except for two combined double issues in April/May and October/November by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription \$55.90 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries \$65.90 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 267 Broadway, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10007. *Asimov's Science Fiction* is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. © 2014 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. Please visit our website, [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com), for information regarding electronic submissions. All manual submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to Quad/Graphics Joncas, 4380 Garand, Saint-Laurent, Quebec H4R 2A3.

Printed by Quad/Graphics, Taunton, MA USA (12/15/14)



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# EDITORIAL

Sheila Williams

## ANOTHER DAY AT THE FAIR

September 2014 gifted us with another beautiful day for the annual Brooklyn Book Festival. The festival is a joyful event that brings together all manner of purveyors of the written word. Our presence at the festival couldn't happen without the diligent and creative work of Jackie Sherbow, senior assistant editor for *Ellery Queen* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazines*, and our own assistant editor, the vivacious and industrious Emily Hockaday.

The event began for Jackie, Emily, and me the evening before at a Gala Mingle and Awards Ceremony held in honor of James McBride that took place at Brooklyn's St. Ann's Warehouse on September 20. There I got to reconnect with an old friend of the magazine, Jonathan Lethem, and to meet his sister, Barcelona-based author and literary translator, Mara Faye

Lethem. Jonathan's first professional sale was to *Asimov's*, and I told him that if he ever tires of sending stories to the *New Yorker* he should always feel welcome to submit them to us. We also got to meet South African author Lauren Beukes. Lauren's novel, *Zoo City*, was the winner of the 2011 Arthur C. Clarke Award. Another high point of the evening was meeting children's book illustrator Sean Qualls after I ran into him. Fortunately, neither of us was the worst for the collision! It turned out that in addition to being an award-winning illustrator of books by people like Spike Lee and Toni Morrison, Sean has also done artwork for *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*.

Emily and Jackie spent all day Sunday, September 21, working at our booth. They distributed over a thousand free magazines to fair goers. Six science

Photo by Trevor Quachri



Sheila Williams, Tom Purdom, and Emily Hockaday

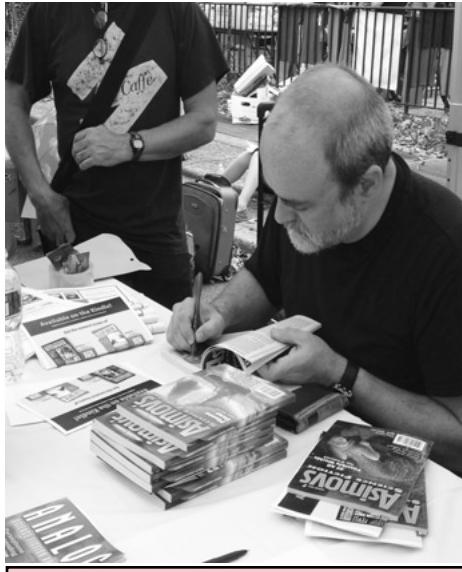


Photo by Mary Jane O'Connell

### Jay O'Connell autographs *Asimov's*

fiction and mystery authors were on hand at various times to sign autographs. We had a Jay and Jay tag team with Jay Werkheiser signing copies of *Analog* for an hour followed by an hour of Jay O'Connell signing his thought experiment, "Is Resistance Futile? Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Google Glass," which appeared in the October/November 2014 issue of *Asimov's*. Later in the afternoon, we were joined by Tom Purdom. Tom signed the September 2014 issue, which contained his novella, "Bogdavi's Dream."

Numerous fair goers stopped by our table. Several were long-time readers; at least one of those renewed his subscription on the spot. Others had picked us up more recently, and some were learning about the fiction magazines for the first time. Among the newcomers was a group of middle-school girls who were thrilled to take home autographed copies of the magazines. Perhaps they'll become part of the next generation of *Asimov's* subscribers. We look forward to visiting with more readers next year, so mark your calendar. It will be a fun day of author panels, books signings, and the opportunity to peruse the wares of hundreds of publishers. We hope to see you there! ☺

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**Stories from *Asimov's* have won 53 Hugos and 28 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 20 Hugo Awards for Best Editor.**

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## ONE-HIT WONDERS

The history of science fiction is marked by the presence of writers who gave us one story of such great impact that it totally overshadowed the rest of their work and turned them into one-story authors. Certain classic examples come immediately to mind: Daniel Keyes and "Flowers for Algernon," Jerome Bixby and "It's a Good Life," Judith Merril and "That Only a Mother," T.L. Sherred and "E for Effort," Wilmar Shiras and "In Hiding," Tom Godwin and "The Cold Equations." Then there are the writers who visit our field only long enough to contribute just a single unforgettable story and then never write a second one: A.J. Deutsch, for instance, who wrote "A Subway Named Moebius," T.R. Fehrenbach, author of "Remember the Alamo," or Malcolm Edwards, whose lone story was the splendid "After-Image." Even Cordwainer Smith was a one-hit wonder from 1950, when his astonishing debut story "Scanners Live in Vain," was published, until the appearance of his second story, "The Game of Rat and Dragon," in 1955. Among novelists, the same phenomenon exists: Walter M. Miller's only novel was *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, George R. Stewart's was *Earth Abides*, Bernard Wolfe wrote only *Limbo*; David Lindsay is known just for *A Voyage to Arcturus*, Daniel Galouye for *Dark Universe*, Ward Moore for *Bring the Jubilee*.

Wyman Guin (1915–1989) was another of those remarkable one-story stars, and, in fact, radically transformed science fiction with the one story by which he is remembered. Writing science fiction was a pastime, not a profession, for him—he earned his living first as a pharmacology technician, then as advertising director for Lakeside Laboratories, a Milwaukee pharmaceutical company—and his en-

tire output consisted of one novel and eight short stories, of which only one, "Beyond Bedlam," attracted serious notice. But what a story that was!

Guin had had one story published prior to "Bedlam"—"Trigger Tide," which appeared in the October 1950 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction* under the pseudonym of "Norman Menasco," and which finished in last place in that issue's reader popularity poll. But by the time it appeared, Guin was already at work on the story that would establish his place in the annals of the field—writing it not for *Astounding*, but for its shiny new competitor, *Galaxy Science Fiction*, under the editorship of the brilliant, irascible H.L. Gold.

Gold's magazine, just a few months old in 1950, was the first serious challenger to the long-time dominance of *Astounding*, edited by John W. Campbell, Jr. and the undisputed leader in the science fiction field since the mid-1930s. Soliciting material from Campbell's top writers, offering them a significantly higher word rate, and prodding them to write with a freedom and abandon that the often dogmatic Campbell would not countenance, Gold established the leadership of his magazine from its very first issue, dated October 1950, which featured a three-part serial by Clifford D. Simak and backed it up with major stories by Theodore Sturgeon, Fritz Leiber, and the newcomer Richard Matheson. Succeeding issues maintained that level of quality with material by Isaac Asimov, James H. Schmitz, Anthony Boucher, Ray Bradbury (the first version of what would become *Fahrenheit 451*), C.M. Kornbluth, and many another top-level writer.

While *Galaxy* was getting under way Wyman Guin was at work on "Beyond Bedlam," doing draft after draft for the

fiercely demanding Gold. We know that because Gold tells us, in his editorial in the August 1951 issue in which the story appeared, that “Bedlam” was “the result of two drafts before submission and two end-to-end rewrites afterward. A total of better than 80,000 words was thus needed to produce 20,000 words that satisfied Guin’s literary conscience and mine.”

It was Guin’s background in the pharmaceutical industry, Gold says, that provided the starting point for the story. Aware of the rising incidence of schizophrenia in post-war America, Guin fastened on the idea of a society in which a majority of the citizens were schizophrenic. What, then? How would the nonschizophrenic minority cope?

Gold’s editorial sets forth not only Guin’s creative process but also the method of story construction that Gold had proposed to many of his other authors, and which had already begun to define the *Galaxy* mode of narrative:

*Push your idea to a speculative extreme. Make the unusual the norm for your society, and then see how things would play out.*

The easy way, the old way, would have been to write a melodramatic horror story: a handful of “normal” people surrounded by an army of psychotics and desperately fighting for survival, or, conversely, a dedicated band of normals organizing to overturn the schizophrenic-dominated world. But what Gold wanted, at least in the early years of his editorial career, was stories that went beyond the easy plot choices. What if schizophrenia were the norm, a universal condition, sustained and supported by medication designed to make everyone, for the greater good of society, remain permanently in a schizophrenic state? What would justify the existence of such a society? And, with a rationale for it firmly established, what would be its “system of ethics, education, morals, laws, etiquette, interpersonal and *intrapersonal* relationships,” all to be developed in a manner “consistent with its psychological basis.”

In other words, invent a parallel society, one that made perfect sense on its own terms, that bore little or no resemblance to the one we live in. To explore such societies, to examine the psychological and interpersonal intricacies that would evolve in them, was the goal that Gold set for his authors. It resulted in a kind of story qualitatively different from those on which John W. Campbell had built his towering editorial reputation. Campbell had been responsible for the development of a pack of new writers who shaped modern science fiction—Heinlein, Asimov, Sturgeon, Sprague de Camp, L. Ron Hubbard, A.E. van Vogt—but he was primarily interested in the future of technology, in the means by which man would explore and conquer the Universe, in the mechanisms that would create the worlds to come. Psychological insights and the play of human emotions meant little to him, and, in fact, he may actually have regarded them as distracting story elements. Gold wanted his writers to depict the interior life of those worlds to come, digging deep into the psyches of their characters, and, in the main, he succeeded in getting them to do it—and they were mostly the same writers, Sturgeon, Leiber, Simak, Asimov, Alfred Bester, James Blish, “William Tenn,” and Robert A. Heinlein, who had helped Campbell build his magazine, plus such newcomers as Philip K. Dick, Damon Knight, Edgar Pangborn, and Robert Sheckley.

Guin’s “Beyond Bedlam” is full of rough edges, as a novella by a novice writer might be expected to be. Its opening pages are loaded with exposition as Guin struggles to establish the assumptions on which his schizophrenic society is based and the pharmacological principles that make it work. My guess is that Gold toiled mightily through draft after draft to help Guin slip all this material into the story and ultimately accepted the fact that this was the best his writer could do with the technical resources at his command. But once everything is finally set up the tale unfolds with a

weird, inexorable power that no one who has read it can forget, with Guin's imagined world of benign psychosis taking on a sort of bizarre plausibility that, for the moment, makes it seem more real than the one that we ourselves inhabit.

That was the beginning, and, essentially, the end of Wyman Guin's career in science fiction: one masterpiece, out of the blue, that permanently inscribed itself in the history of the field. Like Philip José Farmer's equally revolutionary "The Lovers" of a couple of years later, it showed science fiction writers a way to handle emotional richness and depth in an extrapolative story, opening creative possibilities that had simply not existed in the relatively limited sphere of magazine science fiction before.

Guin's other stories, all but one of which are collected in a now obscure 1967 paperback called *Living Way Out* (which, I see, carries laudatory blurbs from H.L. Gold, Isaac Asimov, and Robert Silverberg), were, by and large, minor stuff. I have many times sung the

praises of the 1964 novelette "A Man of the Renaissance," which handles the Leonardo-da-Vinci-as-superman theme with a poise and a confidence far beyond anything that was at Guin's command at the time of writing "Beyond Bedlam," but I seem to have been the only one to notice the story, and up 'til now I am the only one to have included it in a science fiction anthology (several times, in fact). And his one novel, *The Standing Joy*, attracted almost no attention when it appeared in 1969, a year when major novels were appearing by the bushel all around us, so that an unheralded book by a little-known writer was likely to sink without a trace, which is what happened to *The Standing Joy*.

But "Beyond Bedlam" remains, the one story by which Wyman Guin will be remembered. As a story in its own right it is compelling and powerful even sixty-plus years later. And as the harbinger of a revolution that brought us a new way that science fiction stories could be written, it changed the field forever. ○

# RATTLESNAKES AND MEN

Michael Bishop

**Michael Bishop's many novels include *Ancient of Days*, *Brittle Innings*, *Who Made Stevie Crye?*, and *Count Geiger's Blues*, all lately rereleased in new editions by Patrick Swenson's Fairwood Press, the latter two under Mike's exclusive imprint, Kudzu Planet Productions. All four are now available as e-books, with more of his titles, both new and previously published, forthcoming. In his latest story for us, this Nebula-Award-winning author takes a sharp look at the price of living in a very strange society.**

**S**everal Aprils ago, a tornado blew Reed, our daughter Celeste, and me out of our house in northern Arkansas. Three friends in our hill town died. A dozen others suffered injuries or property losses that funneled havoc into their lives too. Even though Reed and I worked—Reed as an auto mechanic, I as an aide in the county library—we had no money to rebuild and no reason to stick around once we sorted out the scramble the twister had made of our belongings and minds.

Dusty Shallowpit, an army friend who had kept in touch since his and Reed's final tour in Australia, called us every other day through June. At last, his voice twanging through our cell-phone speaker, Dusty offered us a low-cost rental house in Wriggly, his hometown in Georgia's southern pine flats, along with jobs that he swore would stand us Godfreys up on our feet again.

"Soon enough, Reed, you'll make manager at Shallowpit Feed & Seed, but you got to start in equipment repair."

"What about Wylene?" Reed asked, glancing at me.

"She can feed her artsy side by grooming dogs and her outdoorsyness doing guide stuff at the wildlife refuge." And Celeste, who'd just finished first grade, would do just fine, he predicted, because "kids her age are so danged adoptable."

"A-dapt-able," I said at Reed's ear, clearly irritated.

"Right," Dusty said. "Your kid's already got a family. Anyways, you all should come. You'll like it here."

I doubted that—at least he hadn't said we'd "love" it—but three days later we rented a trailer, ball-clamped it to our pickup, crammed it full, and drove to Wriggly, way down in Nokuse County, in grueling Dixieland-in-July heat.

I knew right off we'd really goofed, but our two-bedroom brick tract house had its charms, namely, a red-cedar privacy fence, a rock garden that the last tenants had kept up nicely, and a slat-framed glider under a sprawling fig tree. I would have

liked some grass, fescue or such, but Nokuse County has sandy soil and, blessedly, we wouldn't have to do a lot of yard work harassed by gnats.

How I learned our move was a mistake, maybe even crazy, happened our fourth day in Wriggly when Dusty Shallowpit and his father, Jasper, knocked at the door after Reed's first ten-hour shift at the Feed & Seed and I discovered Shallowpit *père* on the front stoop holding a long hole-filled box by a leather hand strap. Celeste ducked under my crossed arms to peer through the screen at our visitors, while I gaped at them in dimwit wonder.

"What's in the box?" Celeste pushed open the screen to reach for it.

Before I could pull her back, Dusty seized the box from his dad and retreated to the sidewalk. Jasper Shallowpit was caught between pique at his son and concern for his three new tenants. He flushed purple and wiped his palms on his khaki trousers.

I laid my hand on Celeste's collar bone.

From the tiny kitchen, Reed hollered, "Who is it?" And when I'd told him: "Let 'em in, Wylene! Let 'em in!"

Soon all five of us—three Godfreys and two representatives of the hamlet's second largest employer—stood in the outflow of our window-lodged AC unit with sweat drying on our brows and napes.

Reed dabbed his lips with a limp paper napkin, while my arms locked our squirming daughter in place before me.

"What's in the box?" Celeste insisted.

Mr. Shallowpit snatched the box back from his son, bowed his bald head to her, and spoke directly to Celeste, though he meant his speech for all of us:

"First, let me formally welcome you all to Nokuse County and to Wriggly, its county seat. I should've stopped by earlier. Second, as your landlord and the current chairperson of the Nokuse Rattlesnake Alliance, I've come—we've come—to give you"—he lifted the box a few inches—"this young *Crotalus adamanteus*, a variety we call the 'lozenge-spot': a pretty little tutelary starter serpent."

I couldn't speak. Then I laughed. Then I blurted, "That's really funny, sir. Thanks for the giggle." What else could I have said? The doofus was our landlord—Reed's plenty potent new boss.

"He ain't joking," Dusty said. "It's a BioQuirked watch-snake, a baby rattler, your all-for-free, native-to-the-Greater-Southeast threshold sentry."

I pulled Celeste closer. "But we don't want it."

"Thank you, Mr. Shallowpit," Reed said, reaching for the leather strap to accept the snake-carry. "We truly appreciate your generous gift."

"Reed, we've got a child. Where would we put it? How would we feed it?"

A pit viper, I thought: *A pit viper?*

"You don't get it, Wye," Dusty said, clearly peeved at me.

The elder Shallowpit inclined his head to me as he had to Celeste, this time focusing on *my* face. "The Nokuse Rattlesnake Alliance has a long, illustrious history, Mrs. Godfrey. Every year for fifty years, we've hosted Nokuse County's Rattlesnake Rodeo and Roundup here in Wriggly. *Crotalus adamanteus* has played an enormous role in both the economy of our region and the shaping of our identity as Nokuseans."

"Forgive me, sir, but so what?"

"Wylene," Reed said.

Mr. Shallowpit's naked face made a fist.

"Sir," I said, "what does all that have to do with giving us a poisonous snake?"

"It's been a county law down here nearlyabout forever, Wye," Dusty said.

I shot question marks back and forth between both Shallowpits.

Daddy Jasper's face unclenched. He opened his slippery hands in what he must have figured was a kindly appeal. "Everybody in the county has got to own a

rattlesnake," he said. "It's a ordinance every city council in every town in our county, however little or big, signed on to on a well-remembered day back some sixty years ago, Mrs. Godfrey."

Reed said, "Sir, you can call her Wylene."

I gave Reed the stink-eye but simmered my tongue to silence.

Mister Jasper heeded Reed: "Wylene, our whole pine-flats society just wouldn't exist without rattlesnakes and what they do for us."

"Or turpentine," Dusty said. "Don't forget turpentine."

Irked, Dusty's father flat-out ignored his son: "Our forerunners decreed that every home, business, and every guvment building, except the town hall and county courthouse, must make space for their own *Crotalus adamanteus*. In fact, to flout that ordinance is to spit in the all-seeing eye of Lady Justice herself."

"She's blindfolded," I told Jasper Shallowpit.

"What?" he said. "What?"

"You can't spit in a blindfolded person's eye, not so it really matters."

"Listen, Wylene, Nokuse County is a very special place. We love our crotalids here. They protect us. They contribute to our economy. They amuse us. They validate us as folks in tune with our reptilian as well as our human natures. Terden BioQuirked Creations is our biggest employer. We brought you this baby"—nodding toward the snake-carry—"as a sign of our concern for your family's welfare and as a down-home welcome to our ways."

Although I crossed my arms over her scrawny chest, Celeste slipped free and dashed into her bedroom.

For several reasons, I had not asked our visitors to sit. The curtain-free living room boasted only two chairs, each with a cardboard box in it stuffed full of winter clothes or pre-owned car-repair manuals. We'd unboxed and stowed almost everything else, but the house, inside, resembled a barracks for elves, and we Godfreys squatters. Reed lifted the holey box to remind me again of our housewarming gift.

"Where am I going to put a rattlesnake?" I asked all three men.

"In here," Celeste called. "There's a place for it beside my bed."

The Shallowpits guffawed—a trombone and a kazoo, respectively—but Reed raised his eyebrows at me half in plea, half in warning.

"Over my dead body," I called back to Celeste.

"Easy." Dusty sniggered. "You just might get your wish."

I stormed into the bedroom, the men all following, and found Celeste kneeling by an empty aquarium I'd all but forgotten. Maybe I'd thought for forty seconds about cleaning it up and dropping a few minnows and angelfish into it, but those forty seconds I'd lost amid a host of more urgent settling-in matters and never recalled until now.

"See there," Shallowpit *père* said. "Your problem solved."

And for the men, even Reed, it was. In Reed's thinking, the Shallowpits had saved us the expense of buying a snake to comply with a hallowed county ordinance. All we need do was accept their gifts—of the rattler, the aquarium, and an injection-molded plastic hide-box (still in the snake-carry) that we would set in the aquarium for its brand-new tenant to slither into to conceal itself from our basilisk human gazes. And all would be well, all would be well, all would be mystically and moronically well.

Well, to *hell* with that shit.

"Put the tank outside," I said. "Celeste and that ugly critter"—which, to that point, I hadn't even glimpsed—"are *not* sleeping in the same room."

Celeste began to wail.

"Hold on, Wye," Dusty said. "You'all've got to keep your threshold sentry beside your place of residence's main entrance."

"Right," Reed said. "We'll put it by the front door."

I was fuming, but Dusty toted the aquarium from Celeste's room and set it down in the living room near the front door. Then he lifted our gift-snake from its box, squeezed it behind its spade-like head, and held its lozenge-spotted rust-brown body over the aquarium floor. By a wrist twist and a bit of luck, he let go of it without getting bit, for it seemed intent on striking his freckled forearm or a smudged pane of glass in the fish tank. Kneeling beside that tank, Dusty drew hypnotic fingertip circles before the watch-snake. As he did, a soft moleskin pouch under his arm poked out to one side and then the other in gently random bulges. I glanced at the elder Shallowpit to detect if he wore a similar pouch, but if he did, his sports jacket hid it. Even so, I suspected—felt sure, in fact—that both men were carrying herpetological heat.

Then Dusty began talking about our snake and how we all must feed it once, soon, to set its imprinting "biostats" for each person living in our house. That would make it our "special protector." Terden BioQuirked Creations, Inc., had used gene quirking and amino-acid infusions to augment the vomeronasal organ on the roof of our crotalid's mouth and hence to allow it to bond with all the "souls" in our house by our specific body temps and odors. With this imprinting and a like sensitivity to the telltale anxiety of strangers come for evil purposes (based on *their* body temps, reeks, and dicey mannerisms), these rattlesnakes—whether you called them "security paladins" or "thresh-old sentries"—would almost always bite and fatally slay any unwanted intruder.

"The best defense against a crook with a carry-snake," Dusty told us, "is a household with a certified and imprinted TBQC rattler." He noted that each such snake rattled its rattle only for its household's residents. By genetic design, it *avoided* rattling its rattle for intruders, the more reliably to strike and to kill the evil sons of bitches.

Although Dusty explained a lot more about these BioQuirked "creations," Celeste came howling into the living room as he spoke. She howled when I shushed her and howled when I took her back to her room. I told her to hush and stay in her bed. She stayed in her bed (so long as I sat on it beside her), but did not quiet until, at long last, she drifted into a whimper-punctuated sleep.

By that time, the Shallowpits had blessedly taken their leave.

Heading to our bedroom, to which Reed had already retired, I saw that Dusty or his dad had put a lid on our slithery protector's tank, securing it with clamps and bungee cords. So we were all safe for the night, if home invaders didn't burst in, rape, torture, and behead us all between now and sunup. I didn't care. The Shallowpits worried me more than did our young viper. But I *did* care that Reed lay facing away from me, rigidly mute, as if I had shamed him before his new bosses-cum-landlords.

I draped an arm over Reed's back and ran my finger over the scar of the arrow-head wound he'd suffered under his heart in Operation Outback in southwestern Queensland. He caught my hand, roughly, and held it. After a while, though, he raised it to his lips and kissed it. Such a blessing: he didn't hate me.

"We can't live day to day with a snake in our house," I whispered.

"The people here do."

"All of them?"

"It's the law, Wylene."

"Is it a law for them to tote rattlers around with them in little moleskin bags?"

"I don't think so."

"Maybe you should find out."

"If it were mandatory, Wye, Dusty would have told me my first day at work. He's got too much invested in me—in *us*—to let me get arrested and locked up."

"Yeah, well, I think he and his daddy carry *personal* security paladins."

Reed sighed heavily and let his higher shoulder slump. "Of course they do."

"Do they tote them even at work?"

"Most Nokuse Countians do, I'm afraid."

"Most? Do you mean everybody?"

"Nearly every man does. It's like wearing a beard is to a grown Muslim male. I don't think many women carry them, even as gewgaws for their outfits."

I couldn't help it: I laughed derisively. "It sounds as if the dudes around Wriggly are all in little-cock compensatory mode."

"Don't go all multisyllabic and shrink-minded on me. I wouldn't know."

I got mad. "Toting a snake everywhere a person goes puts the wearer and everybody else around *him*—I use the pronoun on purpose—at great risk. It all stinks to heaven of fear and fetishism."

"Wye, give me a break."

I crawled over his distractingly sexy shoulder, nibbled a while on his eyebrow, and stared him right in the eye.

"It's crazy. We've got a poisonous serpent in our house, and these yokels pack them around like warlocks with their creepy familiars, tutelary totem creatures."

"Wye, I'm beat. You're making my brain ache."

"How many people in this loony burg die every year of snakebites?"

"Only bad guys and dumb asses—felons and fools."

"Hey, even beat, you alliterated. But I don't believe it. Accidents happen. Nasty acts of greed and sad ones of self-aggression occur."

"You heard Dusty. TBC augments its snakes with biostats, or something like that, to make 'em safe to be around if you're their owners."

"Good old Dusty—he's taught you a lot."

"Yeah, good old Dusty. Still, forgive me for saying so, Wye, but if assholes came any bigger than Dusty's daddy, the most profitable businesses on planet Earth would make toilet paper. Now please let me get some sleep."

Reluctantly, I did.

As things turned out, we didn't have to worry about what to feed our new "pet." Shallowpit Feed & Seed had a reptile-chow enterprise in Nokuse County consisting of imported white lab rats and home-grown rice rats, bobwhite quails, and marsh rabbits. Dusty made sure that a part of Reed's monthly pay went to feed our new adder, the amount depending on the fare that Reed toted home for Vype.

Vype was the name Celeste called the critter after Reed said that she could *not* baptize it Wriggly because too many other threshold sentries in town surely bore that name already. *I*, however, suggested the witty gothic spelling for her *next* favorite choice.

As per Dusty's advice, Reed and I fed Vype first, to make sure it quickly imprinted on us as its family. Then Reed focused on getting Celeste to take a turn, so that we could uncover our tank and benefit from the security and peace of mind that a free and functional watch-snake would provide our household.

But I feared that tenderhearted Celeste would find feeding Vype its live dinners too upsetting. I never thought she'd volunteer for the job, and I told Reed that, even in Wriggly, only a piss-poor parent would let a second-grader feed a poisonous snake.

Reed begged to differ.

He lectured me that Celeste completely got the naturalness of engorging and being engorged. Feeding Vype would teach her more than just the "input-and-outgo rhythms" of all earthbound life cycles. It would also teach her caring—"Not for its terrified prey!" I put in quickly—as well as adult responsibility. "She's a kid," I argued. "And we're supposed to guarantee her safety."

"Too much guaranteeing her safety will turn her into a *permanent* child. She's got to face the world as it is."

"Not yet, she doesn't."

"We're not guaranteeing her safety if we don't allow Vype to imprint on her as one of his household wards."

So, initially, Reed fed Vype its scared-shitless rats and its run-amok quail chicks. But he let Celeste watch, and Celeste *did* watch, and although she was taken aback at first by this transfixing drama (sometimes picking up a white rat and stroking it to calm it), soon she had evolved into a rational observer with a scientific sympathy for both eater and eaten.

Within days, she asked for permission to lower a prey animal or bird into the tank, using a miniature dumbwaiter in a harness of strings. Like a puppet master, Celeste did this skillfully, with no fear at all and, afterward, no gross victory whoops. Then, finally, we took the lid off Vype's tank so that, now, our BioQuirked serpent could properly carry out its role as our security paladin.

Dusty had sworn I could satisfy my "artsy side" and my "outdoorsyness" by grooming dogs or by serving as a wildlife guide in the swamp forty miles south of Wriggly. But most of our hamlet's canines were redbone or blue-tick hounds that needed grooming no more than did Jasper Shallowpit's razor-nicked noggin. And because I didn't want to commute eighty miles every day in our about-to-die pickup, I stayed in town decorating our boxy house and fitfully looking for work.

I found rugs for our scratched pine floors, thrift-shop chairs for the living room, and items among our own belongings for wall hangings. I nailed three of Reed's machine-turned army crossbows in an arrangement above our TV.

On another wall, I hung a display of his photographs of the 23rd Bowmen's Brigade in its war against radicalized abos in Queensland. It pleased him, I think. He invited Dusty over to see my handiwork and ignored his favorite TV shows, *Aussie Archer* and *Knife Music*, as they guzzled beer, pointed out slain or surviving comrades in the photos, and reminisced with hale-fellow-well-whiffled sloppiness.

Meantime, even though Vype had coiled up in his utility hide, Celeste read a fairy-tale to Vype, and I perused help-wanted ads in the *Nokuse County Sentinel*. One ad said, "*Archery instructor for adults & children at RV camp: experience a must. Ditto: having good teaching skills & own equipment.*" The ad listed two telephone numbers, one for daytime calls and one for evenings up until ten.

In Reed's and my bedroom, I called the second number. Reed had often taken me bow hunting, and some of our happiest outings in Arkansas had involved energy-bar picnics and archery expeditions in secluded Ozark glens. I explained all this to the owner of the RV camp, a guy named Newall Alpo, who asked me to come out for a face-to-face interview the following morning.

I had never known anybody with the surname of a brand of dog food, and when I met Newall Alpo in person, I didn't know how to take him. He had a well-oiled 1930s-style pompadour, an ugly snakeskin vest, oddly wide hips, and a brusque, smug manner. Further, he wore a snake on his person, an adult *Crotalus adamanteus*, hanging about his ample waist in the belt loops of his trousers. The snake appeared drugged. Its triangular head stuck out just where a belt buckle would have gleamed, had Mr. Alpo worn a belt instead of a rattlesnake. And although I tried not to let this weird sartorial accessory distract or discomfit me, I didn't fully succeed.

But Mr. Alpo liked my replies to his questions and what I showed him of my archery skills, and when I left his RV camp, I had a job I could walk to and his assurance that I'd get off early enough every day to take care of my daughter after school. Landing this job seemed to me the most hopeful thing that had occurred to us since our arrival in Georgia. It not only pleased Reed: it delighted him. As for Celeste, she begged me to let her come to one of my practices later in the week.

This she did back out at the camp's archery range, standing safely behind me. Each time I emptied a quiver, she scampered to the bales to wrench my arrows out and fetch them back. "You're just like William Tell!" she cried. "Shoot an apple off my head!"

I threw down my bow and shook the goulash out of her. "Maybe I can and maybe I can't, but I'll never even *try* to do that! Don't ever ask me again!" I pushed her away so that she staggered back a few steps and fell.

Immediately, Mr. Alpo waddled up and asked what the hell was going on. (Had I just tossed my first piece of Wriggly good luck onto its funeral pyre?)

Celeste stood and brushed off her dress. "I back talked to Mama, sir. She's told me not to, lots of times, but I . . . I . . . I did it again."

Sizzles of shame shot from my cheekbones and brow.

Mr. Alpo scowled at Celeste. "Always mind your parents. Always."

"Yes sir."

He swung his scowl toward me. "None of that shit with my campers, Mrs. Godfrey. You got that?"

I pulled Celeste to me. "Yes sir, I do."

"It's good nobody else hereabouts saw what I saw." Then Mr. Alpo stalked away, gripping his snakeskin vest by its lapels while his watch-snake writhed in his belt loops like a baleful hula hoop.

Still, I loved the job, especially in the early fall when the RV camp had *beau coups* of campers clamoring for archery lessons. Fairly frequently, Newall Alpo loaned me out to other tourist concerns in Wriggly, a canoeing outfitter, or a special event in the wildlife refuge, but never so late in the day that I could not catch a ride home before Celeste got out of school. That and my new income made the arrangement seem a perfect helping of grace.

But Nokuse County wasn't perfect. I'd missed the annual Rattlesnake Roundup & Rodeo held in March, an event that featured prizes for those wranglers who caught the most native un-BioQuirked diamondbacks and later killed them with hatchet chops behind their heads. As sidelights to the annual roundup, there were also rattlesnake races, training in how to treat rattler bites, and venom-milking shows.

Some of the events to which Newall Alpo "sub-let" me focused on these secondary activities. They occurred throughout the year at city schools or in outdoor venues set aside by civic groups, often on weekends so that Celeste and Reed could see me in action. I was always a diversion from the foregrounded snakiness of everything else going on: the sale of snakeskin vests, wallets, and slippers; of rattler-related videos, coiled-snake ashtrays, and fake plastic, plush, or rubber crotalids; and even of food items consisting of fried, fricasseed, or grilled rattlesnake—*et cetera, ad nauseam*.

A hot Friday night, mid September: Dusty Shallowpit asked us to a football game against Brunswick High in which his son Doug would play. By coincidence, Mr. Alpo had arranged with Doug's head coach for me to work at this game during halftime showing our cheerleaders how to use bows and arrows to burst big Mylar balloons representing the four best players on the Brunswick Pirates. We'd shoot in the eastern end zone where our novice archers could not endanger anyone else attending. Earlier, of course, I'd assumed that our arrows would stand for the metaphorical fangs of our Nokuse County *Diamondbacks*. Or our Nokuse County *Rattlers*. But I was wrong.

As a halftime performer and a guest of the Shallowpits, I got into the stadium free, as did Reed. We perched not quite halfway up the poured-concrete tiers, near the fifty-yard line, awaiting kickoff in the steamy dusk. Celeste was going to a movie with a friend from school, and Reed and I were enjoying, sort of, our first real date in Wriggly.

To our right, someone in a furry black bear costume cavorted in front of both the band and the student sections. Talking with our hosts, I paid little heed. Eventually,

though, I began to wonder why this cavorter had dressed up like a bear. When I asked this question aloud, Hallie Shallowpit said, "A bear's the official mascot of Nokuse County High School."

"Not a rattlesnake?"

Dusty said, "Wye, how could a kid dress like a rattlesnake? You'd have to stuff three students in a long hoop-braced tube and then they'd all have to grab one another's shoes and wriggle this way and that on the ground."

Reed laughed heartily at this picture . . . or at me.

My dander rose. "One kid could be a rattlesnake if you used a sliver of imagination and a nickel's worth of design sense," I said. "It wouldn't even be that hard."

"Wye, our mascot's a black bear," Hallie said again.

"Yeah, but everyone here's so rattlesnake crazy it seems a no-brainer."

Dusty explained that *Nokuse* was a Muscogee-Creek word for "bear," specifically the black bear, which had thriven hereabouts back in the 1800s. Most of these bears, he told us, had long since retreated northward to more heavily treed regions. I said I bet they'd done it because diamondbacks were a damn sight tougher than the absconding bears.

"Even so," Dusty said, "bears still got them a stake in our tradition too."

Squeezing my knee, Reed whispered, "You've just defended the diamondback. You always surprise me, kiddo."

I shoved his hand off my knee.

Doug Shallowpit, a chunky boy who didn't much favor either of his folks, played guard on the Bears' offensive line, but he kept getting hammered by the Pirates' hefty but fleet-afoot pass rushers. The game proceeded sloppily, and, about six minutes into the second quarter, Doug got slammed again. He crumpled to the turf and just lay there.

Dusty yelled, "Oh my God!" and he and Hallie stood. The Bears' coach and a student trainer hurried out to tend to Doug, who still did not uncoil. Then an olive-skinned woman in designer jeans and a white peasant blouse trotted across the field, a brown-and-ocher scarf streaming silkily behind her. She stooped beside Doug.

"Who's that?" Reed asked.

"Lakshmi Chakraborti," Dusty huffed. "*Doctor Lakshmi Chakraborti.*"

Understandably, he and Hallie left us to descend to the field and to hurry across it to their son. Eventually, a motorized cart removed Doug and his folks to the eastern end zone, and the Shallowpits did not return. Reed and I wondered whether to look for them or to stay in our places until they came back.

A minute or so later, a man from a lower row of our concrete tier stopped us on a nearby stairway. A wide-faced man of fifty-five or so, he introduced himself as D. V. Purina and said that Dusty and Hallie were going with their son to a hospital in Waycross because Wriggly, a town with a population of a thousand or fewer, did not have one. I had already known that, so it had pleased me to learn that the woman seeing to Doug was in fact a bona fide doctor.

D. V. Purina—a second local surname echoing that of a popular pet food!—added that Doug had suffered an ankle break and that his folks hoped we would stay to see the rest of the game. If we liked, he'd drive us home afterward. I didn't like that idea much because he had a live crotalid coiled in one of his jacket pockets. In fact, it had propped its head on the pocket's upper edge. To Reed's chagrin, I asked D. V. Purina what his initials stood for.

"Viper Disciple," he said.

"Mr. Purina," I said, quasi-coquettishly, "that would make your initials V. D. instead of D. V., so please tell me the truth."

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Grinning, he said he'd flip-flopped his first two initials to avoid having them suggest "venereal disease"—wouldn't I have done the same?—and returned to his seat over by the band's clarinet section. We returned to our seats on the Shallowpits' favorite tier.

At halftime, Brunswick's band played well. The Wriggly band followed. It marched out of sync while badly reprising vaguely familiar ancient rock tunes, but the band members' parents and pals stomped and cheered like madmen anyway.

Then I went out to direct four giggling cheerleaders in a bow-and-arrow shoot of the Mylar-balloon Pirates bobbing in the end zone like buoys on a hurricane swell. It took ten minutes, and the pops these Pirates made when they burst were fewer and harder to hear, even from where I stood, than the hits that the human Pirates inflicted on our boys in either of the first two quarters.

We would have gladly walked home, but D. V. Purina found us, led us to his snazzy SUV, which boasted snakeskin seats, and dropped us off at our house. Before we told him goodbye, I commented that perhaps our squad would have played better as Diamondbacks than as Bears, better as Rattlers than as Bruins.

"I've always thought that." He handed each of us a business card:

**D. V. Purina**  
*Attorney at Law & Coroner  
Pastor; Take-Up-Serpents House  
Nokuse County, Georgia*

Later we learned that, as a student, he'd been a star running back on the Bears and, a few years later, a wrangler with three consecutive victories in the annual county Rattlesnake Roundup.

As for Doug Shallowpit, he had surgery in Waycross on Saturday. Two days later, he came home to Wriggly sporting a newfangled style of ankle cast. He and Dusty mourned the fact that his season had ended, but Hallie confessed to me her secret relief.

A few days later, Celeste awoke with stomach pains. I sent her to school anyway. When she came home still complaining, I made her an appointment at the Wriggly medical clinic with Dr. Chakraborti.

In its split waiting area, which only a few decades ago had seated whites on one side and blacks on the other, we peered at the art on the walls: reproductions of work by Henri Rousseau, Norman Rockwell, and a startling one of a nude young woman charming a cobra. We also glanced at the people waiting alongside us, and I realized that most blacks, however many had once resided in Nokuse County, had long since left it. Dr. Chakraborti might now be the darkest-skinned person in town. I'd suspected as much, just as I'd known that Wriggly lacked a real hospital, but, filling out a patient-information form for Celeste, a cold adder of apprehension snaked down my spine.

"*Celeste Godfrey*," the receptionist called.

Dr. Chakraborti did not keep us waiting forever in the examination room, and, upon entering, shook Celeste's hand as well as mine. Good: she had her priorities straight. She also had a no-nonsense demeanor and a dry humor that softened her directness when she asked Celeste, not me, about her problem.

When she got down to business, she brushed Celeste's hair back, checked her throat using a tongue depressor, and palpated her stomach and flanks. After this examination, she told Celeste to get dressed again and led me into the hall by my elbow.

Alone with Dr. Chakraborti, I asked, "What's wrong with her?"

"How do you mean, Mrs. Godfrey—as your daughter or as a scared young person?" Her question took me aback, but did not put me off.

"The second of course, but the first too . . . if you know."

"Beyond my medical training, I don't know much. But I discover a great deal."

"What have you discovered about Celeste?"

"She could have a virus or early intestinal cramps, but I *sense* that she's suffering from anxiety, possibly a school phobia."

"Why do you sense that?"

"Other children in town have psychosomatic pains akin to Celeste's."

This was news to me, but hardly a dumbfounding surprise.

"Do you have a rattlesnake in your home, Mrs. Godfrey?"

"It's a law here. So, yes—yes, we do." My defensiveness alarmed me, but I couldn't shut up: "Celeste calls it Vype. She reads aloud to Vype. She feeds Vype. She's totally okay with Vype, I assure you."

"I'm sure she *thinks* she is, just as I'm sure she'd very much *like* to be."

"I'd like to be okay with Vype, too."

"But you're not?"

"Of course I'm not. How could I be? How could anyone?"

"I've been in Nokuse County a bit over a month, and three children under twelve have *died* of rattlesnake bites, one here in town just a day or so ago."

"I've heard nothing of this."

"At the behest of the rattlesnake alliance, local authorities conceal the information from the general public. Moreover, a county law mandates the suppression of death notices for anybody killed by snakebites."

"Whatever happened to the First Amendment?"

"We're in Nokuse County, the Realm of the Raving Rattlesnake Wranglers. Surely, you saw the Paul Desiré Trouillebert in our waiting room."

"I'm sorry—*what*?"

"I'm talking about a painting, of a woman and a serpent."

"Oh, right. The woman in it's nude, right?"

"Yes, that's the painting."

"I actually like it, doctor, but it seems shockingly *naked* . . . in many disturbing ways, especially in a doctor's office."

"Mrs. Enots, my receptionist, tells me that a year ago a member of the alliance came in and hung it where you saw it. Then he insisted that it stay there."

"But it's an Oriental scene, and the serpent in it's a cobra, *not* a rattler."

"It's still a snake-loving male's ultimate wet dream."

"Yeah," I glumly conceded. "You're probably right."

"I've taken it down and shut it up in a closet at least four times since my arrival, but Jessica—Mrs. Enots—always finds it again and puts it back up. She says we're safer with it on the wall."

"I can believe that, too."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Godfrey. I've taken us pretty far afield, haven't I?"

"No problem—but how did a woman of your background wind up in a godforsaken little backwater like Wriggly?"

She told me that a program in India and a similar one in the U.S. had supported her move to our under-served county. They gave her a scholarship for additional training at the medical school in Augusta and loan-repayment aid if she practiced two years in a rural area. But they'd provided few clues about what lay in store for her.

At that point, Celeste emerged from the examination room, dressed.

"Doctor," I said, "I saw you at Friday's game helping an injured player."

"Oh yes, young Mr. Shallowpit. I discovered his problem and sent him to Waycross for surgery—not a very satisfactory use of my hard-earned skills."

"But helpful: *essential* for anybody who happens to live here."

"I'm here now." Celeste held out her arms to prove it.

Dr. Chakraborti leaned over and kissed her sweetly on the forehead.

"Why, yes, so you are. I'm prescribing something for your stomach pain and maybe something else as well."

"What 'something else'?" I asked.

"I thought a tranquilizer, but she's far too young, and I don't want to hurt her. Nor do I wish to incur a malpractice suit."

I winced at this pronouncement.

"Steady." Dr. Chakraborti turned back to Celeste. "If you'd care for a lollipop, go see Mrs. Enots. She'll bestow one on you—like a medal, no doubt."

Celeste ambled down the corridor, her fingertips brushing the wall. Dr. Chakraborti gazed after her with undisguised fondness.

"Doctors have their peculiar wild-hair notions, too," she said. "Good ones—and I'm a good one—don't act on them." She added that Celeste had sensed my anxiety and adopted it as her own: a secret act of filial concern for whatever was now troubling me. "Would you like me to prescribe *you* a tranquilizer?" she asked.

One of the kids who had died of a rattler bite had gone to school with Celeste. At a parent-teacher meeting three days after we saw Dr. Chakraborti, I got this word from the mothers of two of Celeste's classmates.

These women claimed that the tutelary rattler of the boy's family had bitten him as he slept. But his daddy, a member of Take-Up-Serpents House and the Nokuse Rattlesnake Alliance, denied this assertion and did not take him for an antivenin treatment. Both dad and mom claimed that a fever had seized the boy and that they'd thought aspirin and cold compresses would banish it. When this did not happen, they drove him to Waycross for a definitive diagnosis, but on the way he died. This story had big holes in it, but the boy was irretrievably gone, and Celeste slid more deeply into her upsetting funk.

You can't easily hide the death of a school-aged child, and this family did not manage to. Publicly, his parents said the boy had died of a rare and virulent form of meningitis. His memorial service, a few days after news of his death ran through town like a flashflood, drew many mourners, young and old. Celeste asked Reed and me if she could go. Bleakly cheered by her interest, we accompanied her to the event, which wrapped everyone there in a cosmic despondency.

The next day, a skinny young stranger walked all around Wriggly handing out flyers or sticking them under the wipers of parked cars. The flyers said that at least three children had fallen victim to rattlesnake bites over the past month and that several adults in the pine flats north of town had suffered bites that had made them deathly ill or, in the case of one victim, killed her—though her husband refused to admit that their threshold sentry had so much as flicked its tongue at her.

Mr. Alpo caught the skinny stranger slipping a flyer into the door handle of an RV in his camp, braced him against it, and read the flyer. It ended by urging every citizen to turn in their tutelary rattlesnakes to a state veterinarian who would come to town shortly to examine and possibly even defang them.

Because Mr. Alpo had thrust a dropped flyer into my hands, I knew their common message. Further, I knew that each one bore this signature: *Lakshmi Chakraborti, MD, GP, RCG (Rural Care Giver)*.

And our skinny flyer supplier, given dire warning, wisely hightailed it.

Uh-oh, I thought: Uh-oh indeed.

Two days later, I returned to Dr. Chakraborti with Celeste to see about her lingering apathy and depression. We sat in the waiting room paging through old magazines, sneaking glances at the naked snake charmer as I tried to fathom my reluctance to take Vype out back and decapitate him.

The clinic door opened, and Jasper Shallowpit stuck his head in and whistled shrilly. Mrs. Enots whistled back in a less shrill tone, apparently acknowledging that he and his pals had arrived just when expected—by Mrs. Enots, if by nobody else.

The door then banged entirely open, and, along with Jasper and Dusty Shallowpit, three more mostly ugly men burst in: D. V. Purina, Newall Alpo, and Tug Terden, a grizzled country-western rocker who allegedly owned more rattlesnakes in Nokuse County than any other native-born citizen.

In his shaggy mid-sixties, Terden was also the heir to and the figurehead CEO of Terden BioQuirked Creations and hence a major source of funding to institutions, festivals, associations, and alliances dependent on both native rattlers and the BioQuirked kinds. I had heard of Tug Terden years ago, for a record called “Snake-Bit Klooxer” and for several well-publicized arrests for indecent exposure at various undersold concerts. But, until moving to Georgia, I had never known that he hailed from Wriggly or that he derived such clout from its most notorious “bio product.”

All five men burst in shouting, “Lakshmi! Lakshmi! *Lakshmi!*” Celeste screamed, and two or three other patients also stood, I among them, as they toppled end tables and yanked cheap reproductions by Rousseau, Rockwell, and Warhol from the walls, but left *The Nude Snake Charmer* hanging. But, even as distraught as I was, I figured that Terden had taught his fellow marauders all he knew about staging disruptive chaos.

“*Mr. Terden!*” I shouted. And: “*Mr. Alpo! Mr. Purina! Mr. Shallowpit! Dusty!*”

All five men paused in their wilding to gawk at me.

“Wylene,” Dusty’s father said, “take Celeste and get the hell out of here.”

“No sir, I will not.”

“You better,” Mr. Alpo said. “You all could get hurt damned nastily.” The snake in his belt loops did its signature peristaltic horizontal dance.

“Go ahead and fire me,” I said. “We’re staying.”

“Why?” demanded Mr. Shallowpit, or possibly, “Wye!”

“To witness and testify to your vile punk vandalism!”

Dusty looked nonplussed, sheepish even, but Tug Terden sidled over and stuck his drug-drawn mug so near to mine that I could smell the whiskey in his pores.

“Look,” he said. “I’d never hurt this little chicko of yours—not here, anyways—but, you buttinski Ozark hoor, *you’re* fair game.”

Lakshmi Chakraborti stepped into the waiting room. “Mrs. Godfrey is not your prey, Mr. Terden. Or, I shouldn’t have to remind you, anybody else’s.”

Dusty pulled Terden aside to menace me: “Wye, if you throw in with her to make us put down or defang our rattlers, you’ll pay!”

“Tell me how, Dusty: You gonna sic your trouser-snake Wriggly on me?”

Now a cayenne-pepper red, he lifted a white-knuckled fist.

Dr. Chakraborti said, “You have no credible reason to pay this clinic such an unruly visit. Get out, all of you. And don’t leave without Mrs. Enots. She’s fired.”

“What?” Mrs. Enots said. “Why?”

“Because you’re Newall Alpo’s sister, Jessica, and you never told me.”

“What difference does that make?” Mrs. Enots asked.

“That nude over there belongs to Mr. Alpo, and from day one you’ve colluded with him to keep that inappropriate image on our clinic’s walls.”

"Hang on a sec," D. V. Purina said. "Stop passing out flyers threatening our rights to own and handle serpents. Stop asking your patients intrusive questions about their threshold sentries. And what the hell's 'inappropriate' about a snake?"

I held up my cell phone. "Should I call the police, ma'am?"

Before Doctor Lakshmi could respond, Terden eased over to her, grabbed her throat with one raw hand, and banged her head against the door behind her. I hit the number for the police department in my cell listings just as he took a rattler from the thigh-pocket on his camo pants and thrust its wicked head into the doctor's face.

Queasily, I thought, he could've done that to *me*.

"You'll soon be one badly snake-bit quack," he told Doctor Lakshmi.

D. V. Purina grabbed Terden and flipped the rattler free of his grip. "You're abusing that snake, Tug." It had now begun to coil about on the linoleum as if either stunned or galvanized. "We've made our point," Mr. Purina said. "Let's haul our grits out of here." He seized the twisting rattler, folded it back into his pocket, and dragged Terden away from the doctor. He and his pals led Jessica Enots, their spy, toward the office door, Dusty glaring back at me venomously. As they left, Mr. Alpo stopped, lifted *The Nude Snake Charmer* from its brackets, and carried it out with him.

The door slammed shut, and all I could think was that we had survived a potentially deadly assault of rattlesnakes and men. Two patients who'd endured it with us broke down, one in tears, the other in discreet gibbering.

Dr. Chakraborti did not back off, and because she didn't, the Nokuse Rattlesnake Alliance invoked its assets all the harder: zealous supporters, deeply ingrained rattlesnake fetishism, well-established local law, a culture of machismo entitlement, abiding economic interests and incentives—*et cetera, ad nauseam*.

Doctor Lakshmi continued to preach to local mothers, appealing to the instincts of life-preservation that the rattlesnake alliance had also staked out, albeit differently. She and her followers stressed nurturing and sustaining life, the alliance its lordship over natural and BioQuirked creation and also its members' right to proactive self-defense.

Doctor Lakshmi's approach appealed more strongly to me, but many women sided with their men because they disliked being labeled ultra-fems. Others had livelihoods based on raising and selling either rattlesnakes or their prey, on making rattlesnake novelties and clothing; or on hawking security systems dependent on Tug Terden's BioQuirked threshold sentries.

Very few men sided with Doctor Lakshmi.

I worked on Reed. "Do you know what your friends the Shallowpits and their crew want local law to do now?"

Unhappily, Reed shook his head.

"To mandate two rattlers for every three human beings in a household! To authorize living pit vipers even in the public schools!"

"Shit." Reed looked down in palpable chagrin.

"Doctor Lakshmi says a baby that recently supposedly died of SIDS has—"

"Died of what?"

"SIDS: sudden infant death syndrome; crib death. Some say it happens from infants sleeping on their stomachs. Some say it's—"

"Okay, okay. Hasn't that SIDS crap been passé almost forever?"

"I guess, but some Nokuseans use it as a cover for babies that die of crotalid bites. Our coroner, Mr. Purina, regularly reports snakebite deaths as SIDS-related. If an adult dies of a snake bite, he blames either a heart attack or a stroke. You'd be stricken by the number of *women* who die of these two 'causes,' especially in homes cited for domestic disturbances and likely abuse."

"Who told you all this crap?" Reed asked.

"Doctor Lakshmi."

"Jesus, she's overstepping herself—that's all private info."

"I don't believe that, and if it *is* legally private, it shouldn't be. We're talking public health here, mister."

"Bullshit," Reed murmured.

"Right back at you. Think on this: Your friends the Shallowpits would rather lie than admit that one of their precious pit vipers has murdered a baby."

"Murdered? Snakes lack consciences. They don't murder—they kill."

"Dead is dead if it's your child. The *Shallowpits* have consciences, don't they? How can they swallow all the Alliance's cynical and transparent lies?"

"They grew up here. It's their livelihood, partly—also their culture."

"To watch their kids and other family members die? And to think they're addressing the issue by asking every citizen to harbor even more venomous snakes?"

Reed pursed his lips. "Wylene, they're *BioQuirked*."

"You know, if it took a normal adult human male nine months to have an orgasm, maybe he'd finally get it."

Reed's eyes widened in horror. "What?"

"What do guys invest in creating a kid—two minutes of drool-accompanied pelvic thrusts? If it took you three quarters of a year to get your ashes hauled, maybe you'd feel a tad more committed to the resulting kid and wouldn't start so many damned wars or shrug off your own and other people's kids' premature deaths as if they had no more significance than a swatted housefly's."

After several beats, Reed said, "I sort of resent that, Wye."

"Adults who can't handle life's fatal realities have no right to resent the truth." Those words spoken, I stomped away fearing they'd had no effect whatsoever.

War broke out, raged or sputtered, and whelped its casualties.

At an official meeting in Take-Up-Serpents House, the rattlesnake alliance and our Wriggly city councilpersons—most of whom were *members* of the former group—approved a resolution requiring that households of more than three persons adopt two pit vipers as guardians, with another serpent for every three additional persons. It also insisted that every classroom in the city's public schools purchase a "pedagogical security paladin" from Terden BioQuirked Creations, Inc.

After this in-your-face local victory, the alliance took these proposals to every town council in Nokuse and petitioned for their adoption. Despite some organized opposition, every council voted to do as asked. Two town councils stipulated that the snakes fulfilling a protective function must be "poisonous native, i.e., North American, pit vipers." This clause permitted households to catch or buy copperheads and cotton-mouth water moccasins, not merely native or bioengineered American rattlesnakes, as threshold sentries and living pocket protectors. It did so even if their lack of Bio-Quirking made them more unpredictable and thus more dangerous than TBQC crotalids—which rattled politely for their owners' benefits but for nearly everyone else maintained a deadly dead-eye-dick silence.

Tug Terden opposed this clause, but by this point the extremists among these outlier alliance members had the upper hand and prevailed. (*Extremists?* How does an extremist define "extremist"? I saw them as self-righteous lunatics or psychopaths.) Still, BioQuirked sales teams began going door to door with young rattler specimens as starter or pedagogical serpents. They had warrants to search each house to ascertain if they had the needed number of security paladins for all their human residents.

Doctor Lakshmi and I, along with many women and a few men (although not yet Reed), protested these mandates, picketing TBQC, Shallowpit Feed & Seed, the

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businesses of those making snake-related novelties, and even the homes of non-aliance city councilors who had cravenly or corruptly yielded to every damned aliance demand.

We were heckled, harassed, beaten, and snake-bit, even as two of our persecutors were lethally poisoned by their own carry-snakes in two separate assaults on us. Our foes' rattlers, despite BioQuirking, often struck randomly in such melees, just as a sane person would expect. I read the deaths and injuries to our enemies as poetic justice (God forgive me), but in most of *their* cases, access to antivenin prevented deaths.

By contrast, we were *denied* antivenin treatments. Hence, we always donned high-topped leather boots and thick clothing for our protests. Of course, I felt sorry for the wives and children of the men who had fallen victim to what I couldn't help calling "benevolent viperity," but it served the jerks right.

Didn't it?

Life dragged on, like an engorged serpent seeking a spot to digest a big meal. Our protests occurred less frequently. Newall Alpo had long since fired me, and when I applied for the receptionist job at the Wriggly clinic, an anonymous committee nixed my application and gave the post to Hallie Shallowpit. In addition, Mr. Alpo, D. V. Purina, the Shallowpits, and a host of others continued to revile Dr. Chakraborti and her allies, me included, as outlaws, traitors, and saboteurs of Nokuse County culture.

**VIPERS SAVE LIVES**, Morrison LePieu, the lobotomized chairman of the board of Terden BioQuirked Creations, liked to say, and anyone disagreeing was an alarmist idiot. To me, that motto made about as much sense as Orwell's fictitious slogans **WAR IS PEACE, SLAVERY IS FREEDOM, and IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH**. When a rumor began circulating that Tug Terden had approached the Irish government about supplying it with BioQuirked rattlers as stealth defenses against some militant separatists (because, after all, **VIPERS SAVE LIVES**), Reed clutched his head in histrionic agony and cried in his worst Irish accent, "*Has the whole damned world gone buckfuck then?*"

Unfortunately, Celeste did not improve, and because her classmates had targeted her as the spawn of both troublemakers and traitors, I pulled her out of school and taught her at home. Further, Dusty told Reed that if I did not stop agitating for Doctor Lakshmi's agenda, he'd fire Reed, as painful as he, Dusty, would find doing so.

Reed, either manning up or losing his grip (if not both together), replied, "Fire me, Dusty," and when Dusty did, we Godfreys found ourselves incomeless in a house that Jasper Shallowpit said we must vacate in two weeks.

That evening I shot arrows into as many sun-bleached planks in our privacy fence as I could. Drenched in sweat and so blurry-eyed that the whole bonkers world looked watery, I said to myself, "*What do we do now? Where do we go?*"

That night Celeste overheard Reed and me talking—about Wriggly, its inhabitants, and our current dilemma. I found her outside our door and walked her back to her room. Again cynically channeling Julian of Norwich, I told her that everything, every single thing, would be well, yes, all would be well, yada yada yada.

The next morning, looking zombie-like over her cream of sawdust, Celeste let her spoon fall and slumped sidelong before Reed or I could catch her. Reed scooped her up and carried her back to her bed. A thorough examination revealed that she'd neither bumped her head nor bruised any part of her lower body. We checked her out for Vype's bite marks and found nothing worrisome. We rarely let Vype out of his tank anymore, but Celeste still doted on him, and we could *not* watch her every moment. But because we'd inspected her for bites, we now had not a clue what had prompted her swoon.

I called Doctor Lakshmi at the clinic, and Hallie told me, coldly, that she had not yet come in. I more or less believed her, but maybe Hallie didn't give a keratin rattle what befell *any* of us backstabbing Godfreys nowadays.

Then Hallie said, "I'll tell her you called, Wye, as soon as she gets in." She sounded no warmer speaking these words, but she did what she said she'd do, for in less than an hour Doctor Lakshmi made a house call on us.

"It's more of the same," she told Reed and me.

"Meaning what?" Reed asked.

"Suppressed immune system, extreme depression, and total withdrawal as a form of subconscious escape and self-protection."

I asked, "What should we do?"

"Get her out of here. Take her back to Arkansas. Relocate to Alaska."

"Are those our only options?"

"Import a gazillion king snakes or mongooses and let them wipe out every rattler in the region." She shook her shiny but unkempt tresses as if to dislodge a sleeping asp within them. Then, knowing that she had *not* encouraged us, she referred us to a child psychologist in Waycross. This sad concession to our hopelessness broke my heart.

"Oh, Doctor Lakshmi!"

She grimaced in apology, and we hugged like long-lost sisters reuniting. Reed stood to one side fidgeting, like the father of a terminally ill child . . . as maybe he was. Well, no—no, he wasn't.

Doctor Lakshmi returned later that day to give us a prescription that she'd filled in town: pills for Celeste's stomach, others to buffer her depression. She and I sat for a while in the glider on our stone patio out back, staring at the fletched ends of the arrows protruding from plank after plank in our privacy fence.

"How do you plan to get all those out?" Doctor Lakshmi asked me.

"Maybe," I said, "I'll just let Dusty snatch them out with his teeth."

The next day, Doctor Lakshmi told us, she'd take a leave of absence—with a PA, or physician's assistant, from Brunswick as a fill-in—and drive to Atlanta to ask officials at the Centers for Disease Control for help in halting the preventable epidemic of snakebite injuries and deaths in Nokuse County:

"It's criminal and the state should intervene," she would tell them. Us she would tell, "In my absence, Godfreys, you must hold your heads up, take care of Celeste, and, yes, *keep the faith*."

Somehow or other, Dr. Lakshmi Chakraborti took her concerns not only to the CDC, which rebuffed her (owing to the discovery in Iowa of a veteran of the Australian war infected by a bacteria with global-epidemic potential), but also to representatives of the *Atlanta Constitution* and three of the city's local TV news teams. None of these organizations—apparently—had rattlesnake alliance sympathizers in their executive hierarchies, and so Doctor Lakshmi was able to speak to both print and broadcast reporters. She conferred with them about falsified medical reports from Nokuse County and about the snakebite deaths that its well-established coroner, D. V. Purina, had attributed, questionably, to other causes.

Segments of these interviews aired on TV in Atlanta and environs and, amazingly, in Wriggly via a satellite service that we subscribed to. I say "amazingly" because censors at the Atlanta-based stations generally redacted from the feeds to our area any and all commentary critical of the crotalid-related industries in South Georgia.

"What do you want to happen?" one reporter asked Doctor Lakshmi.

"Real improvement in the lives of the citizens of the county in which I've worked these past few months."

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"Are you a citizen of that county?"

"Only in a technical sense—I'm fulfilling an obligation I incurred while earning my medical degrees in Augusta."

"You've raised serious concerns about the integrity of a county official."

"I've told the truth. Clearly, this coroner is protecting Terden BioQuirked Creations, the culture of herpetological excess that reigns there, and also people making tons of money from these interests' dangerous activities."

"Uh-oh," I said sidelong to Reed.

"No shit," he replied.

Later, when everything was over, we learned that somebody in Nokuse County had contacted Governor Bixby Wheeler, a smoothly corrupt South Georgia boy, to tell him that a "buttinski foreign hoor" had gone on TV to besmirch the proud names and the economy-driving livelihoods of thousands of law-abiding Nokuse Countians. And she was doing so—"Irresponsibly!"—at the expense of those very citizens.

When Dr. Chakraborti returned to Wriggly three days after these interview snippets aired, she found a group of vigilantes boarding up her clinic. Several patients had queued up outside to watch, as had many other people, all initially unbelieving. This time, the vigilantes did not include even one of the five alliance big shots who had disapproved of the flyers she had paid an "out-of-town mercenary" to pass out.

No, this group consisted of four or five younger males who looked as if they denned every night with rattlers. All had face-only smiles you'd expect to find on Halloween masks, and their carry-snakes had come along as hatbands, epaulets, belts, or slippery pocket riders. Their activities in front of the clinic pissed off rather than scared Doctor Lakshmi.

"Stop!" she ordered them. "Tear down those boards."

Instead, said my informant, they seized her, duct-taped her mouth shut, laid her on the sidewalk atop a big sheet of plywood, bungee-corded her to it, and poured blackstrap molasses over her from tins they had brought along with their clinic-closing tools. Doctor Lakshmi fought this indignity, lurching futilely from side to side and struggling to scream through her duct-tape gag.

She had no help, though, and the vigilantes had their sick premeditated way.

"If I'd been there with quiver and bow," I told my informant, "I'd've shot each of those douche bags straight through an eye—*thwap! thwap! thwap!*"

"No, the layout of the buildings wouldn't have let you. Even if you'd been shooting from a rooftop across the street, all the spectators would've posed problems. If you'd been on a street or a sidewalk, you might've hit one, maybe two, of her attackers, but those guys pack throwing stars as well as snakes, and they'd've hit you with a *shuriken*, or closed on you and pulled you down before you could hit more than one of them. Only a fool would have tried it, Miss Wylene."

"You're giving those damned sons of incest too damned much credit."

"No, ma'am, you're giving them too little. They're fanatics. They practice all the time. They're fallible, but they're also good enough to bean you with a *shuriken* and slap a snake on you to deliver the *coup de grace*."

My informant went on to say that the alliance vigilantes then broke open five or six goose-down pillows and shook their feathers all over Dr. Chakraborti—a modified tar-and-feathering that led even ordinarily decent people in the mob to laugh, point gleefully at the victim, and generally revel in the high-and-mighty doctor's humiliation. I just could not get this behavior, but my informant said there had been plenty of other witnesses and that it all had "gone down" just as he was describing it.

Next, he went on, the triumphant clinic closers had lifted Doctor Lakshmi's plywood bier and carried it above their heads through the streets like a shoddy float in

a two-bit Mardi Gras procession. My informant knew where they were taking it, but he, unfortunately, could not follow them there—at least not yet.

“Where?” I demanded. “Where did they take her?”

To one of the warehouses of Shallowpit’s Feed & Seed, my informant replied. When they arrived, they put her plywood pallet atop a bank of plastic-wrapped hay bales. Helpless in her bonds, sweltering in oozy syrup, she lay beneath a swaying electric lantern in a vaulted niche of the warehouse. Then they left, locked the building, and scattered. Their strategy was for Doctor Lakshmi to suffer. And she did.

Insects—mosquitoes, horseflies, and blurry-winged millers—tormented her.

Then the rats came out to taste the molasses and maybe her flesh, and, after the rats, the warehouse’s security paladins, rattlesnakes all, emerged to eat the bloated rats and poison the poor brutalized woman.

“That last stuff never happened,” I said by way of protest.

“No—no, ma’am, it didn’t.”

It didn’t happen because, later, my informant crept up to the warehouse, made a way in, and with a Swedish army knife, kitchen tongs, olive oil, and many other small serviceable items, freed Doctor Lakshmi from her bonds.

He then guided her to a shower stall in the old structure, gave her soap and a curly brush, privacy for her ablutions, and, later still, a T-shirt, a pair of jeans, and some tennis shoes to replace her own spoiled clothing. He also handed her keys to a doubtfully reliable pickup on the premises and advised her to use it to carry her out of town. And she used it for just that purpose while my informant limped home and crawled into his bed as if he had never, at least on that night, stirred from it.

“You’re talking about Doug,” Reed said as we drove *our* pickup away from Nokuse County as fast as possible—with a trailer attached and the freight of all our problems heavy on our minds, but weightless on the truck’s spavined frame.

“I am. He swore me to secrecy, Reed, until we were out of town, but he couldn’t let me go without easing my mind about Doctor Lakshmi.”

“My God, the nerve of the boy.”

“He’s a really good kid.”

“I guess so, but Dusty would shit a brick.”

“Hallie wouldn’t. She must’ve done something right or Doug would have turned out just as sadly adder-pated as his daddy.”

In fact, Doug’s actions that night, and also later, enabled Doctor Lakshmi to travel to Washington, D.C., to confer with a female senator from Georgia who sent U.S. Marshals to Wriggly. They arrested D. V. Purina and each of the five vigilantes in the feather-boarding of Doctor Lakshmi.

Cell-phone videos of their assault not only easily identified the culprits, but also ran on national and state newscasts, with simultaneous Internet showings, many of which went viral. The videos created a tsunami of outrage that further embarrassed local officials and the furious leaders of the rattlesnake alliance. They could not condone what their young thugs had done, but neither did they wish to condemn their actions. And, by denial and demurral, they scoffed and did not condemn them.

Reed glanced sidelong. “I’m sorry I ever brought you down here, Wye.”

“One way or the other, we all pass through this territory eventually.”

We rode listening to the hum of our threadbare tires. Celeste snoozed on the bench seat between us. Her health, mental and physical, had measurably improved just in the past week, and she had not fallen prey to any apparent separation anxiety from leaving our rental house, Wriggly, or our snaky companion, Vype. In fact, I had set Vype free in the exhausted turpentine flats behind our fence, and he had quickly slithered away.

Shallowpit Feed & Seed, Terden BioQuirked Creations, and the rattlesnake alliance all remained in business, and Bixby Wheeler was reelected in the gubernatorial race that fall. But a spotlight had shone on all Nokuse County and its bizarre mores, and it continued to shine upon them.

Doctor Lakshmi had not yet returned to town—many people wiser than I knew that it was unsafe for her to return—but she now had friends in higher places than our gold-domed Capitol. Also, I had her cell number and her email addresses, as she had mine, and the world seemed far less venom-filled than it had mere days ago.

As we cruised away from Wriggly, Reed said, “I can’t get over Dusty’s kid.”

“The boy knows a real human being when he meets one. Doctor Lakshmi qualifies.” After a moment, I added, “So does his mother.”

“*Sunuvagun*,” Reed said. “*Sunuvagun*. ”

I had never heard that expression before, but the way Reed inflected it, it had an affectionate, even upbeat lilt that kindled in me a scrappy hope. I asked him where he had heard it and what it meant.

“It’s old abo army slang. Dusty once said he thought it meant something like—you know, like *Will miracles never cease?*”

The next day we entered Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee—for we had traveled north—and took time to drive through Cades Cove. Celeste jerked upright on our pickup’s bench seat to peer through our bug-spattered windshield into a glen carpeted with grass and studded with oaks. In this glen, a black bear and two cubs immediately caught our attention. One cub sat on a limb high above their watchful mother, but the other romped all around her through lush spears of emerald green.

And for the first time that year, I felt almost as if I’d come home, even as I also knew that one day we would return to Nokuse County to meet with Doctor Lakshmi again and to atone for our failures there—not with its BioQuirked rattlers, but with the men whom those snakes had so easily and thoroughly beguiled. ○

# GHOST COLORS

Derek Künsken

**Derek Kunskken <[www.derekkunskken.com](http://www.derekkunskken.com)> and @derekkunskken blogs at [www.blackgate.com](http://www.blackgate.com). The author writes science fiction, fantasy, and sometimes by accident, horror, in Gatineau, Quebec. His work has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Analog*, *Best Horror of the Year*, and multiple times in *Asimov's*, as well as in audio in *Escapepod*, *Pseudopod*, and *Podcastle*. Derek was short-listed for the 2011 Aurora Award. Although he won our 2012 Readers' Award poll for the hardest of hard SF, he turns his attention now to something a little eerier.**

Pablo whispered about x-ray energies and trace metals and sections. His refrain had backgrounded itself over the years, like the white noise of radio, weaving into dreams of other things. Vanessa pushed Brian harder.

"Get him to shut up, Brian!" she said. He blinked. The curtains glowed with sunlight. Seven-thirty, Saturday morning. "Fuck!" she said, covering her head with her pillow.

Brian slipped out of bed and padded to the kitchen. He ran the water, put on a pot of coffee, and then fell onto the couch in the living room. Pablo would follow. Pablo had haunted Brian for a few years now, and was hard on his relationship with Vanessa. The apartment smelled of coffee by the time Pablo's voice, quiet like a TV turned low, whispered in his ear about metals and the colors of feathers.

Brian slept again and the sun was warmer and higher when Vanessa woke him by kissing his ear. "I'm sorry, honey," she whispered. "I'm so sick of that creepy thing."

"I know."

She rose from where she'd knelt, picked up yesterday's paper and recycled it in the kitchen. Cups scraped in cupboards. He put his feet on the coffee table.

Near the TV, in neatly taped boxes were old things, knick-knacks, souvenirs and a lot of the dishes, art, and CDs he'd picked with his ex-wife. Old letters from his marriage. Bits of detritus he'd inherited from Aunt Nicole, like bottle openers, gifts from her clients, and going-away cards. Vanessa was right. They needed to make space for her to move into his small apartment.

Vanessa lived without the silt that filled every open space in life. If she hadn't used something in the last year, she tossed it. She lived in a pristine present and did not suffer material what ifs and maybes.

It wasn't easy to live like Vanessa. Brian sometimes needed a past. He reminisced. He rerooted himself, not often, and certainly not every year, but letting go of the past did not feel easy. He liked the disbelief and proof of time when he looked at college pictures. He liked reminders of dusty Christmases. His bottle caps that had once filled a bag in the closet were colored fossils of year-bleached summers.

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He'd broken cleanly with his ex-wife. He didn't carry a torch or baggage, but neither had he tossed all of their old things, the last of the evidences of what he'd had. Some things were replaceable. Some things were not. The idea of throwing away old letters and notes gave him the same dizzying feeling as slipping a tongue into a gap where he'd lost a tooth. Time misplaced things. Memory lost its edge and dredged up the wrong moments. What came after colored what came before, dishonestly so.

His marriage had been a burning, tumbling thing. Their youth and passion had welded them in college and they married for the right reasons. The end of his marriage was sad, like the end of beauty or innocence. It colored what came before as if there'd been no magic at all. He'd spent months wondering what life would have been like without her. Paths not taken. But then, he found a note she'd given him in the beginning and he made peace with the past.

The idea of peace with the past bemused Vanessa. She was neither at peace, nor at war, with her past. She had no relationship with it. Her present was complete. Being with her pressed Brian against the rush of now. With her, he savored food, rolling in salts and sweets and textures. Without effort, she drew his attention to his body, the muscles that surged during, and ached after, a hard game of squash or pick-up football. Even sunlight seemed to be a thing to her. Near her, it became a thing to him, when he stilled the rush of life, and warmth exerted pressure on his skin. She was a lens to sharpen the wonder and bloom of the present.

Vanessa curled her feet beneath her to sit beside him.

"Are you worried about seeing the gene therapist?" she asked.

He shook his head.

She put a hand on his. "It's a few treatments, Brian. The risks are small. People with heavier hauntings than you go through this every day. It will be good for you. And good for your children."

He looked up from her hand. She had an ironic smirk. They were about to move in together. They were young. They wanted to travel, to live. They had both avoided the question of children, as if by unstated collusion.

"I'll be with you," she said.

A tiny, distant sound began, a needle-tip scratching petrified silt from fossil, and Vanessa was on her feet. Pablo spoke in a thin, oblivious voice, at the edge of audibility, as if preparing for a lecture. "*Traces of copper, revealed by synchrotron rapid scanning x-ray fluorescence, map the presence of eumelanin to predict the color of ancient feathers.*"

Vanessa stalked away. "I don't know what I was thinking, dating a guy whose family is haunted!" she yelled.

"I'm sorry," Brian said.

She came back in a few minutes, dressed. "I'm going to visit my mother," she said. "I'll be back in the afternoon to go with you to your appointment."

"I love you," he said.

"I love you." She came close, kissed him, and then left.

"*Animal pigments, primarily melanosomes and phaeomelanin, can be mapped by x-ray illumination of zinc and calcium in fossils,*" Pablo whispered.

Pablo, in life, even when circuitously and fruitlessly courting Brian's Aunt Nicole, had lived in the past. His science had done nothing useful, had not done anything for the world. His life's work had been to add knowledge of color to fossils. Plants. Animals. Feathers. Skins. Scales. Petals. And in death, Pablo clung to a love that had no use either.

Pablo had haunted Nicole for the last decade of her life. Despite the fact that ghosts made most people uncomfortable, she had delighted in having inspired a love

that death could not still. She reveled in the adoration, even as she held out for the one great love who never came. Was Pablo's enduring, unrequited love of great intrinsic value, and admirable, or was it a sign of the shallowness of Nicole's own life, that it needed a ghost to lend it meaning? In her last months, the only people at her bedside were Brian and Pablo's ghost.

*"Eumelanin is inferred to have been present in the eyes of ancient fishes by the trace metals found in fossils, adding dark colors to our understanding of the past,"* Pablo said from far away. He spoke on, quietly, but sometimes fiercely, about the pigmentation of fish scales, while the sound of his ghostly pick scratched an accompaniment.

It was never difficult to dispel Pablo. It only took listening to him. Pablo might not even know he was haunting Brian. Ghosts persisted, wrapped in a past they could not penetrate, and they wandered until they found a place where they were comfortable, even if they did not understand why.

Only when he was older did Brian come to understand what sorts of things went on at his Aunt Nicole's, although from the beginning, it had felt odd. After school each day, Brian came in by the side door in the alley. A bouncer, or a girl in her underwear holding her robe closed with her hand, opened in response to the secret knock. Backstage, some girls primped their hair or fixed their costumes.

Aunt Nicole's office was at the back and she gave him money from the petty cash to get a Coke and a bag of chips. The machine dispensed Cokes in bottles and he learned to pry his own bottle cap off at the machine. They listened to music from the forties and fifties on her computer. Aunt Nicole wasn't that old. She was about fifteen years older than Brian's mother, and would only have known of such music like everyone else, by digging it up.

Aunt Nicole drank gossip, even the happenings at Brian's school. She learned the name of each kid in his class, and pumped him for the endings of stories that needed days to unfold. The common stories, the ones that had no ending, disappointed her. She preferred stories where what Aiden did one day affected Rafiki the next, because things were connected.

After his pop and chips and interrogation for gossip, Brian did his homework. Sometimes, she would help. Other times she didn't need to, or she didn't know how. On Tuesday, on his second week of going to Aunt Nicole's after school, the scratching sounded, like a dentist pick on teeth. Aunt Nicole was reading a book with a beautiful girl swooning on the cover. She read as if she didn't hear the metallic scritching in the walls. When mumbling joined the noise, fear tickled down his spine.

"What's that?" Brian asked.

"Don't worry about that, sweetie," Aunt Nicole said. "That's just Pablo. He's a ghost who likes me."

Brian felt his eyebrows rise high and tight on his forehead. Two kids at his school were haunted. They weren't in his class, but he knew they got made fun of. He'd avoided them too. The school had held a bake sale earlier in the year to raise money to get them gene therapy. Brian hoped he was never haunted.

"He's harmless," Aunt Nicole said. "He doesn't even know we're here. Not in the regular way."

"What's that noise?"

"He was a scientist. He worked with fossils, so he spent a lot of time scraping the old bones out of the rock that had them trapped. He's still doing that now."

"You talked to a ghost?"

"Well, goodness no, Brian! You don't talk to a ghost. *They* might talk a lot, but they spend a lot of time talking to themselves."

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"When did you talk to him?"

"Before he died. He used to come to see me dance when I was young."

"He liked you?" Brian finally said.

Aunt Nicole put down her book. "Sweetie, he loves me," she said, as if capitalizing the "L."

"Why?"

Aunt Nicole laughed and Brian's face became hot.

"I was the one great love of his life."

"Why?"

Aunt Nicole patted his arm. "Everyone gets one great love, if they're lucky," she said. "Pablo had gone through most of his life without one. When he met me, he fell head over heels for me, like I was a fairy tale princess."

"You're not a princess."

"It was meant to be, sweetie. He was meant to know his one true love."

"Is he your one true love?"

She snorted. "Pablo is too humdrum! My prince will sweep me off my feet."

The scritching scraping continued, sourceless and distant, like it was buried in the walls, or behind Brian's chair.

Children judge with a purity of selfishness that adults cannot replicate. If something did not affect them, their egoism had no room for judging others. So Nicole taught him a different view of life. She taught in parables starring Pablo and Nicole, and their mistakes. She used Pablo the way Plato used Socrates, except that her parables clung to quixotic ventures and human failings. Pablo's lack of money, his shyness, and his lack of grace and confidence, all withered under her lens. She spoke down to Pablo's weakness of resolve regarding her, the begging nature of his courtship. Those things did not attract her, but in a paradox even a young Brian could see, his pining did. She had a hole in her heart, an aching for acceptance and legitimacy, just like Brian did, except that her acceptance could only be enjoyed by denying Pablo.

Nicole described Pablo's passion for science uncertainly, always grasping for the right amount of dreaminess to describe a romantic spirit nourishing itself on things long dead, his heart beating for the colors of stone-etched dinosaur feathers and fossilized flower petals.

"Why would he want to look at colors?" Brian asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know what colors the dinosaurs were?"

This question was serious, aimed at him as a child, even though he understood she meant it to have more meaning than he thought. This was the one part of Pablo that was a mystery to her, and she was really asking. The soberness of that moment etched into his memories. He traced the sweating condensation of his grape pop with the purple bottle cap. It had never before occurred to him that dinosaurs could be any color other than green.

"Yes," Brian said.

"Knowing those colors is the great thing in his life," Nicole had said. "So much that he didn't stop doing it when he died."

"But you're the great thing in his life," Brian said.

She smiled. "I am his one great love."

Brian smiled too.

Brian could not say for sure what old thing separated Nicole from her sisters. His mother was free enough with stories of the past, but not about Nicole. In stories, Nicole was always implied to have been there, like something seen out of the corner of the eye, with conversations evaporating as soon as the young Brian asked about her.

Only when Brian's parents had divorced, and his mother was struggling with two jobs, a tiny apartment and a son, did she finally turn to Nicole. And yet even when Brian was spending three hours a day with Nicole, his mother avoided talking about her. She was not invited to holidays, and her gifts, crass things his mother had called them, hibernated in the closet until garbage day.

Brian came home with his homework done, and his pockets filled with bottle caps from strange places, printed with exotic symbols hinting at the vastness of the world. His mother, appalled, forced Brian to throw away the evidence, even if fermented, that Germany, Canada, and Holland existed. Brian saw Nicole, while his mother felt only the touch of her passing.

As soon as Brian was old enough to stay by himself, his mother ended Nicole's role in his life. And in the weird way that children keep no attachments, Brian saw no more of her, except for birthday and Christmas cards from her, which he opened eagerly for the small checks within.

One day, when he was thirteen, for reasons he did not know, he visited her after school. The bouncers were new. Gone was the secret knock. Nicole arrived breathlessly at the door, holding closed a thin robe with a hand. Her hair was an unnatural red, and her face was older, pasty with makeup.

She hugged him awkwardly, and he was between the ages that knew how to hug back. She dragged him past the bouncers indecisively, through the back, and to the old office. She wasn't the manager anymore. The pop machine had matured, shrinking into a modest thing that sold aspirin, caffeine pills, and breath mints. Aunt Nicole covered a sourceless embarrassment with an effortful smile. After only a little while, Brian said he had to go.

Brian did not see Nicole again until he was in college. He was walking past a furniture store when an older woman, smoking on the sidewalk, stopped him. Nicole wore a respectable, but threadbare, suit and sedate makeup. She must have been in her late sixties, but was still working. They began meeting every so often for coffee.

Nicole had lost none of her ability to speak to what seemed to be on his mind. She knew women and she knew men better. She pried his girl trouble gossip out of him and pontificated on relationships, as if she were teaching him to ride his first bicycle. And now that he was older, her lessons and stories drew on a deeper past, his mother and grandparents.

She shone hard light on his mother's hazy half-stories. The teenage lives of his mother and his aunts lost the editing. Nicole filled the gaps in his mother's stories with violent boyfriends, past-due rents, part-time work as dancers, and drunken, broken hearts. His mother and his other aunts had left their pasts behind, because they could, because they had lived their mistakes young enough.

Brian was, by turns, appalled and embarrassed and sympathetic and forgiving for all that had been hidden. They'd committed some of their follies when they were younger than Brian was now, and the urge to protect them from hurts decades gone was hard to put aside.

Nicole poured her past into him with an intensity he did not understand for almost a year, until she needed someone to bring her home from a medical appointment. She knew she'd been edited from her family. She understood the transient forgetfulness of the society she'd kept. And she feared vanishing, slipping beneath the surface without anyone noticing.

Pablo began haunting Brian three years after Nicole died. Brian had been sharing a house with his college friends, shifting from a life of temporariness to the working world. Pablo came during a hockey game. At first, the distant scritching metal on

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stone sounded like a squirrel in the attic. The whispering came next, quiet against the game. At the end of the first period, his friends checked the cable connections, switched channels and finally muted the TV.

His friends were fascinated, irritated, and wary. Hauntings were not dangerous. They were inconvenient. Hauntings were never perfectly on target, so neighbors looked on a haunting in a building as they would the upstairs tenants getting a big puppy, something to wake them up at odd hours and drive down property values.

Brian wondered if he'd done something to deserve this. By rights, his mother or one of his aunts should have been haunted. Ghosts haunted families. Informational patterns in DNA attracted them. Had the time Brian spent with Nicole predisposed Pablo to seek him out? In some cases, ghosts just vanished with those they haunted.

In the end, Brian accepted Pablo like an awkward roommate, someone easily ignored most of the time, and who, in the end, he could live with and even become fond of. Nicole had protected the ghost as if he were someone who needed protecting. He did. Just like Nicole. For all her worldly flaws, Nicole had been an innocent, as terribly vulnerable as Pablo, holding out for a great love in a world of thorns. She had hidden that hope, not telling the girls she employed, the men who visited her, nor the family she embarrassed. But she had told Brian, with the trust given to children, who rarely care. And taking care of lonely Pablo was the last gift he could give to Nicole.

About six months after his marriage went south, on a lark, he went to a gala at an art gallery that was raising money for gene counseling and gene therapy for poor families that were haunted. Dating was not going smoothly. It was depressing to start at zero again, to meet new people without the innocence that once made trusting so easy. And he was self-conscious about Pablo. Maybe dating someone else with a ghost would make things easier.

Vanessa was the wine-toting, fast-talking machine behind the evening. She appeared twice as large as she really was, and was everywhere at once, introducing speakers, artists, and haunted families. She took money from the rich like a conman. She stopped beside him twice in that first evening, leaning in with sly comments and smiles as if they'd known one another for years. She made him trust.

And she wanted to trust.

She was looking for something honest and transparent, not because she knew she needed it, but because she felt something missing. Brian was not glittery like the guests, nor luminary like the artists, nor courageous like the haunted. He just was.

The evening wound down. The luminaries were done with their glow. The haunted were finished showcasing their need. The rich left their money and guilt. Brian and Vanessa sat side by side on the stairs to the stage, wine glasses in hand. She'd just teased him about dating and the world today, and had said "I would never date a haunted guy," like the open hand of a handshake, waiting for the responding grip.

"I'm haunted," Brian said.

She looked at him over her shoulder, sobriety creeping back upon her. "What kind of haunting?" she asked.

"Small," he said. "Quiet. Easily dismissed."

She looked at him for a long time, long enough for the evening's hope to begin to wither.

"Maybe that's not so bad," she said.

Vanessa picked him up that afternoon to drive him to the clinic. She greeted him with a kiss, a latte, and a bubbly laugh. They drove. Although somatic cell gene therapy had come a long way, changing the DNA in most of the cells of his body, secreted away in so many different tissues and gene expression environments, was

complicated. Retroviruses could be tailored to attach to receptors in dozens of different tissue systems and relatively non-invasive surgery could even put them past the blood-brain barrier. Technological advances had made the risks vanish. Insertions of provirus into junk DNA and genes that were known not to be needed in adulthood would change Brian enough that Pablo would have a hard time recognizing him. Pablo would eventually go.

His old junk was boxed and ready to go. He understood why Vanessa wanted a clean slate. It was not because she often said "you get over a relationship by deleting it. They're all practices for the big one that works." That was part of it, but it was too facile. Moving in together was a big step. They were conscious of the magnitude of their decisions right now. Vanessa loved him and would not share him, even with the past.

She found a spot in the parking lot of the clinic and turned off the car. Brian didn't take off his seatbelt. She looked at him and put her hand on his. "Are you scared, Brian?"

He shook his head.

"Are you having second thoughts?" she asked, more quietly.

He nodded. "Do you think it's important to know what color the dinosaurs were?" he asked. ○

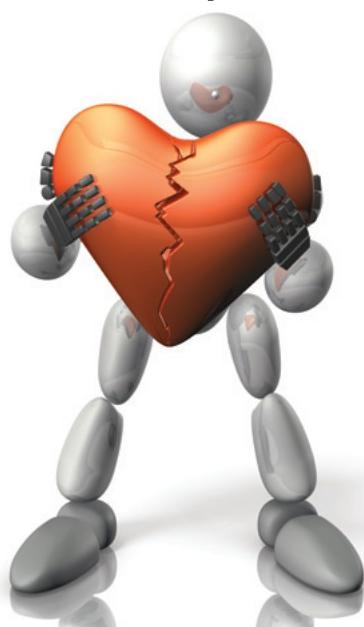
## An Unrequited Process Loops

Love is just a chemical in the brain,  
Outside the frame of the electronic.  
But if its magic is merely autonomic,  
Why do I feel this unrobotly pain?

Easily mocked, this fault-stopped strain,  
To call it heart-break would be ironic—  
Love is just a chemical in the brain,  
Outside the realm of the electronic.

Whiles, ifs, untils trap me in this refrain,  
My need for you is a loop that's chronic.  
Why should my lithium cells all drain,  
If love is just a chemical in the brain,  
Outside the frame of the electronic?

—Marie Vibbert



**Elizabeth Bear is the Hugo, Sturgeon, Locus, and Campbell Award winning author of twenty-five novels and over a hundred short stories. *One-Eyed Jack*, her most recent book was published by Prime in August and her next novel, *Karen Memory*, will soon be out from Tor. The author's dog lives in Massachusetts; her partner, writer Scott Lynch, lives in Wisconsin. She spends a lot of time on planes. Fortunately, she had a chance to turn her attention to future life spans and the problem of . . .**

# NO DECENT PATRIMONY

**Elizabeth Bear**

**"No Decent Patrimony" copyright 2013 by Sarah Wishnevsky. Originally performed in the audio anthology *Rip-Off!* edited by Gardner Dozois.**

**M**y father is deceased.

Gravel gouges my palms, my knees. I crawl across the smoking ground from where I was thrown. I'd say I take his hand, but it's not—not his anymore, and not really a hand. I take the remains of his hand, bloody and raw. Splintered things grind inside, as if I had clutched a bag of broken glass. His face is—

His face isn't. The hulk of his car smokes beside him. My own hand burns where I touched his skin; the burning echoes all along my shoulders, my spine, in my hair. I had turned, begun walking away—

Acid. The fuel cell exploded.

That doesn't happen.

Thickly, as if through feet of water, sirens tremble in my ears.

It's five days in the hospital. Would have been two, but I have private insurance and can pay to keep the healthcare income unit out of my private room. Two might have been better, because after day three I've had exactly enough of daytime dramas that have been on the air since my father was a kid, as unchanged and as unchanging as their core market. The old adage was that it took three generations for a social more to change; how different now, when the generation in power never needs to let go of it. They'd never have gotten same-sex marriage or right-to-gender rules through Congress in these days, when the longest-serving senator has been there for a hundred and fifty years.

The press are waiting for me on the day when I am released—a mad whirl of bloggers, journalists, cameras, tweeters scattered all over the steps and stretching down Seymour Street. Behind a police cordon stand the protestors. A clump of Anonymous, hooded and masked. Professional protestors with fluid placards and

crowdsourced distributed funding paying their bills. There are even a few of the old-school paint and plywood variety.

I particularly like *Please Die So I Can Have Your Job*.

It's a circus, and of course it's not for me. Not really. Not at all. It's for my father, and for the people who might be influenced by these performances. It's sort of comforting to look down there and think, *this isn't about me*. I stand watching it from a sixth story window when Marna comes in.

"Edward," she says, coming over to take my hand. "You'd think somebody important had died."

Marna never approved of my father. She's not alone in that. At a certain level of fame, everyone feels entitled to have an opinion of you.

"Fuel cells," I say. "They don't just explode like that."

She shrugs. "Maybe it was all his tinkering."

My raw palm burns when she squeezes. She says, "I got the hospital to agree that you could sneak out through the children's wing. A car's waiting."

"Will you have to push me in a wheelchair?" They always say it's liability issues. But I think it's about control.

"There's a steam tunnel. I think they expect you to walk." She pats me on the shoulder. "Come on, Eddie. Get your pants on."

The steam tunnel is actually kind of fun. It connects the two hospitals—adult and children's—and I'm pretty sure it's mostly only used by staff members. It probably dates from when they got hard winters here. Now there are tornado shelter signs posted. Marna and I walk through as fast as I can manage. I have to lean on her, and I have to pause frequently. The weight of my arm doesn't seem to trouble her. She's also carrying my bag. She wears tailored slacks. A white sleeveless top lies open across her collarbones, displaying an athlete's shoulder development.

As we wait for the elevator on the other end, the sweat beaded on my forehead trickles into my eyes. My back still tingles, despite the anesthetic cream. They told me I got lucky. Lucky not to need skin grafts. Lucky I was as far away as I had been. Lucky that my back was turned. Lucky it wasn't much worse.

They said my father got the reverse. Fuel cells . . . just don't blow up that way. And he was just about to get into the car when it happened.

The tunnel was cool; the children's hospital is passively temperature-controlled and quite comfortable. When we step out of the revolving door onto the sidewalk, the tropical heat of New England in April hits us like a steam towel slapped across the face. But the car is right there, one of my father's, a self-driving model. He had half a dozen, some retrofitted antiques, and damn the tax penalties for owning multiple automobiles.

There were a lot of things about which William Jacobin, my father, said damn the tax penalties. Such as creating me. And putting me through the process that his investment capital had supported, a hundred and fifty-odd years before.

That's one of the reasons Marna hated him. Hates him.

I hesitate by the car. "What if this one blows up, too?"

"It won't."

"What if my father was assassinated?"

She sighs and opens the door. "Eddie. It won't blow up. It was a freak accident. Let's roll."

Her head-tilt and glare are three parts concern, one part affection, one part exasperation. What the hell do I have to do to get this woman to sleep with me?

We climb into the cool interior. Air conditioning dries the sweat on my neck, sends chills across my scalp. Marna insists that I ease into the back and stretch out. I'd fight her, but I know from the nauseated tingle that I'm pale from walking, and the sweat challenging my wicking shirt's ability to keep up isn't just from the heat. In fact, I'm cold as hell, and the glare of the sun on pavement slices right through me.

The windows are tinted; between that and my eyelids, it's almost bearable. The pressure of the seat against my scalded back is as nauseating as the walk was. As we pull away from the curb, the electric motor silent, the tires hissing on pavement, Marna reaches back between the front seats and pats my knee. I try not to notice . . . at least not viscerally.

My father's RFID gets us through the checkpoints without so much as a hesitation. It's all security theatre, though we're supposed to believe it serves some useful purpose for the public safety.

Somehow, I make it home without vomiting all over the interior of the car. My father's car. My car now, I guess, when against all expectations I have somehow . . . inherited something.

Inherited everything.

I know I can only escape for so long—but I'd hoped the respite would last longer than the brief ride from the hospital to my father's house. I try to concentrate on catching up with inboxes, keeping my eyes lowered, ignoring the scenery. As the car whirs through the automatic gates and up the curving driveway, though, I am distracted from my feeds by a woman who waits beside the steps to the front door. When I lift my head to peer through the window, I see her just clearly enough through the blurriness of injury, exhaustion, and painkillers to wonder how she scaled the estate wall in those shoes. She looks tightly professional in her beige suitjacket, her hair done up so severely I know she's trying to seem more mature than she is.

I'm familiar with the problem of being underestimated due to my apparent age. That she's trying so hard to look older—rather than flaunting her dewy olive skin and slick, inky hair—tells me she's not one of us. Not elect. Just another natural wearing a feed and shifting nervously from foot to foot.

"I'll get rid of her," Marna says from the front. "You keep your head down—"

"No," I say, as Marna's door cracks open. Her shoes crunch on the drive. I have to raise my voice and repeat myself, which takes more energy than it should.

She pauses half out of the car. Her hair's as black as the trespasser's, but silvering at the temples. Her clothes are considerably more casual. Marna doesn't try not to look like a natural. For her, it's political. "Eddie?"

"I'll deal with her," I say, not really sure why. Pity. Exhaustion. The urge to talk about my father to somebody who will be excited to hear it, because it's the scoop of a young career.

"You feed one, you'll never get rid of the rest of them." Marna turns back in to talk over her shoulder.

"I'll call it an exclusive." The young trespasser is picking her way toward us. She's trying to look confident and managing something more like a hesitant march. The suit isn't tailored, but it's meticulously pressed. From the way she holds her arms, I guess there are half-moons of sweat concealed beneath it. There's no telling how long she's been standing in the sun.

I bet she's just starting out. She's got the hungry look of an independent, running her own feed, no real following. I look at the three stories of violet, green, lemon, salmon, and white Queen Anne Victorian rising behind her. The extravagant retrofits to bring it up to modern code, to make inhabitable a house built in an era when coal and oil furnaces kept people warm in bitter winters, are invisible under gracious nineteenth-century wood and stone. It looks as it always must have, the green-forested hills rising behind it. No insulative foamed ceramic siding coarsens its outline; no habitat frame dripping greenery conceals its elegance; no turf, turbines, or panels have been thrown up willy-nilly to muddle the line of that colored slate roof, the slender turrets.

My father would say he earned the money and the privilege. But he handed it to me, along with the anti-aging process that his venture capital funded the creation of and that his paid-for politicians worked to keep exclusive.

"Eddie," Marna warns.

"You keep wanting me to speak out against the elect and the geriatocracy." I'm not playing fair. She shoots me a look that tells me she knows it. "Help me out of the car."

Marna stands, turns, passes her hand across the sensor to open the rear door. It pops for her and she reaches in to help me slide across the seat. The clothes she brought for me to come home from the hospital in are just khakis and a cream-colored, short-sleeved shirt. I smooth the collar with my thumbs. Too late to do anything about the hair, burned and bleached by acid, patchy and greasy and uncombed.

"Mr. Jacobin," the trespasser says, one hand extended. Despite the sun, I can pick out the shimmer of her feed across her irises. She's spending her money on tech, not clothes. I could fix that for her. I wonder if she's got the ethics to say no.

I guess I should probably feel guilty, but you don't grow up in my father's house without understanding intimately that everybody has a price.

Facewreck tells me her name and a quick link gives me an idea of her provenance. I show her the bandages on my right hand and say, "Pardon me if I don't shake, Ms. Garcia."

She winces an apology. Time will grind that out of her: I just wrong-footed her reflexively, gaining the advantage in the conversation, and she'll need to get over it if she's going to succeed in her chosen career.

She is Sandra Garcia; she is just as young as I thought. She runs an investigative blog out of Brooklyn, so she's come a couple of hours by solar train to get here, and then either hired a share-car or found a rideshare out to my father's house. One of the advantages of living where I live is that it's expensive for people to get to you—unless they already have the money to maintain a private vehicle. So she's smart enough to know I'd never consent to a remote interview, and bold enough to hope that a pretty woman showing up at my door might have the edge in getting me to talk.

"Mr. Jacobin, you probably know why I'm here." Wrong-footed or not, she's not a coward. She glances at Marna and holds out a hand again, although there's a little tremble in the gesture this time. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I don't think we've met."

Marna smiles. She's a privacy hardliner, and keeps herself off Facewreck and the paparazzi sites with lawyer letters she's endlessly qualified to write. "Marna," she says, and takes Ms. Garcia's hand. It's a cool, professional handshake. I know what it feels like, because Marna gave me one just like it the day we met. "I'm Mr. Jacobin's counsel."

Give Ms. Garcia this—she takes it without a flinch. She nods politely, says "a pleasure," and turns back to me. "I was hoping I could interview you for my feed."

"You're not feeding now?"

"That would be illegal without permission," she says. "If you agree, we'll start, and I'll allow a thirty second delay and recall."

Pain, grief, shellshock are retreating in the practiced businessman's mindset that my father pounded into me. "A word of advice, Ms. Garcia?"

She leans forward.

"Don't offer the concessions until people ask for them. Please flash Marna the contract. She'll look it over, and then we can have a chat."

Ms. Garcia blinks, her face stilling for a moment as she checks what I said for the trap. Her mouth is half-open; she was ready to argue her case.

I kill my feeds, my inbox notifications. This deserves my full attention.

"I'll offer you an exclusive, ma'am."

\* \* \*

Ten minutes later, we've walked around back and the ducks have come running—or waddling—to greet us. It's not actually affection; they're hoping to be fed. My father's gardener—*my* gardener—Olivia is down in the vegetable patch tending the tomatoes, which explains why she didn't notice the journalist hanging around the front steps. The mower is leaned up against one of the yellowing legacy evergreens—trees my father fought to keep alive, but even he couldn't make a temperate conifer endure the new normal—blades freshly sharpened and shining, but Olivia hasn't started the grass yet. There's an acre and a half of lawn back here; keeping it mowed is job security at its finest. The hedge roses around the borders are wilting. We can pay to exceed our greywater ration, and my father often did—a form of conspicuous consumption. From the sidelong glance Marna shoots me, she's wondering what I'm going to do about those roses now that they're my problem. Her neck curves like a sculpture. I'd swallow my tongue for permission to lay my palm against it.

Some of the roses are over two hundred years old, planted by my father's mother. It seems a shame to destroy them—and a shame to keep pouring resources down the hole of their nonadaptation. Marna doesn't feel my ambivalence about the whole thing. Maybe I should just let her rip them out, and then hate her for it.

That would be my father's solution . . . would probably have been my father's solution.

You're supposed to bring a woman roses when you court her. I wonder how Marna would react to the uprooted corpses of five hundred rose trees that have endured since the twentieth century.

Marna leads Ms. Garcia over to the table under the ponderosa lemon dominating the yard, flanked and supported by fat-trunked fan palms. Its branches hang heavy with fruit the size of footballs. Garcia gives it a quick visual scan; she's got to be filtering its cultivar and approximate age for her feed. My father planted it just around the time New England really started warming up, about when Bridgeport was inundated. It's older than all three of us put together, and it required serious protection during the wild years of the climate swing.

Camilly has noticed I'm home. She brings out the kitchen scraps for the ducks and asks if I'd like refreshment for Ms. Marna and the other guest. The ducks recognize the bucket and respond by pushing and shoving around my feet. They're small, black. They have uneven white bands around their necks. Jade-green iridescence shimmers across their feathers when the sun strikes them.

I wriggle my unburned hand into the glove Camilly tucked into the bucket handle, hook that handle awkwardly over my wrist so it doesn't press bandages against tender flesh, and start broadcasting the scraps. Ducks pile over one another, webbed feet pedaling. I feel the unwilling smile curve the corners of my mouth.

They were a boyhood project, and my father never liked them—though he liked the eggs well enough. It was more political than personal for him, raising some of our food here. A way of saying we weren't nouveau riche, we didn't need to perform as consumers by letting other people grow everything we ate. It was a kind of conspicuous consumption via refusing to participate in conspicuous consumption, as it were. I never quite figured out how it meshed with roses, but as a wise person once said, the mystery is not that human beings don't make sense, it's that they ever do anything non-contradictory at all.

"Cayugas," Ms. Garcia says on my right. She must have skinned them, unless she has some weird reason to know a lot about ducks.

"A heritage breed," I confirm. "They started off in upstate New York. I like them because they're quiet. As ducks go. And pretty."

"As ducks go."

When I glance at her, there's a sparkle. More than I anticipated. I match her smile. A dim red light flickers in a corner of her iris. "Are we recording?"

"Is this a photo op?"

"Oh, definitely. I keep ducks around for ops with the journalists I strongly discourage from coming to my home."

"Touché." No rancor. "Are they good layers?"

"Supposed to be very tasty, too, but I'm too sentimental to eat acquaintances."

Marna is watching from a few feet off, outside of Ms. Garcia's pickup range. "You'd never have made it as a farmer."

"Or a cutthroat venture capitalist," I agree. "I've the privilege of living off the legacy of someone else's ruthlessness."

If it took her aback, she finds her feet again and presses on. "Tell me about your father."

"My father is deceased. I've been in the hospital since the . . . explosion." Behind Ms. Garcia, Marna lifts her chin in warning, like a restive mare. But I can't make myself say *accident*.

Fuel cells just don't explode like that.

When Garcia is gone, I'll put Marna on the police. I was interviewed in the hospital, but I want to be kept apprised of the state of the investigation, and cops are like anybody else. You get exactly as much attention and consideration as you ride them for—until you don't want it, and then they're over you like butter on toast.

"I'd rather talk about his life than his death." Garcia has a nervous tic of miming pushing hair off her face, even when it's all tied back sleekly. She says, "That surprises you."

"It's not every day the world loses one of the elect. It's not every day—"

I pause. She waits. So much of the art of the successful interview lies in an inviting silence. She could be good at her job someday—

But maybe I've gotten lost in my own train of thought again. Or maybe I'm just pretending. I don't reemerge until she clears her throat and says gently, "Congratulations."

It puts my head back. The ducks scatter as my body jerks, then reconvene at my feet. They're still skirting Garcia. The pail is almost empty. "I'm sorry?"

"On your inheritance. On . . . being out of your father's shadow. Were you distracted by your feed?"

Does she think I'm checking the stock ticker? The headlines? Texting with a lover?

"Just my thoughts." Is she really going to take the interview confrontational this quickly?

She says, "Can you tell the ducks apart?"

I huff through my nose and toss more scraps. "Inevitable, I suppose."

"The death?"

"The congratulations. Thank you, of course. And of course I am relieved."

"You were about to say?"

*Hide the frown. You're recording.* Marna is chewing her lower lip, but letting me play my game.

I don't look any older than Ms. Garcia. But unlike her, I'm at least a little older than I look. "I was about to say . . . 'It's not every day the world loses a Jacobin.' But then I thought we might be better off if it did."

She tries to hide the eye stutter as she triple-checks to make sure she got that on media. When she looks back, I've managed to arrange my lips in a tolerant smile.

She says, "I'm sorry if my congratulations were out of line."

We're struggling for control of the interview now, and both of us are trying to look like we're not doing it. I bite my lip against a giggle as I imagine a fistfight in the cockpit. I wonder if she has developed the instincts yet to feel the weight and trajectory of the conversation, the way it has a life of its own. The fact that I mean to take it away from her.

I find my dilettante pose and smirk. "Oh, no. There's no need to lie about it. Isn't everyone a little relieved when one of those superannuated fuckers kicks it? *Sliiiiiiiides* off this mortal, as it were? No matter how ugly that sliding is. Especially the kin, who can

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finally get down to the serious business of scrabbling over the inheritance without worrying that grampa is going to outlive the moon. No. No . . . *apologies* are necessary.”

“But you cared,” she says. “He was your father. He wasn’t just William Jacobin, filthy-rich elect, legendary investor behind the Maddox Process, founder of the geri-ocracy, notorious rich guy, impediment to your inheritance. He created you, didn’t he? Raised you? You knew the private man.”

A little too well. “You have a way with words. Are you always this plainspoken, Ms. Garcia?”

“You mean confrontational.”

“I said what I meant.”

“Usually people read a blog before they consent to the interview.”

“That’s why you show up on doorsteps, huh?”

She cracks first, face breaking in a smile. But she doesn’t look down. “Are you saying you didn’t have any warm regard for the old man?”

“William Jacobin—” I sigh. “—everything was a trophy to my father. This house. Me. His money. Living forever. Assorted members of congress and the occasional megastar. The car that killed him. It’s not that he didn’t care about things—but what he cared about was owning them.”

“But you loved him anyway,” Garcia says, persistent.

“Yes,” I tell her. “I loved my father. After a fashion.”

A note of admiration keeps coming back into her voice as she talks about my father. Of course—she’s young, and although she thinks of herself as a hard-nosed investigator, it’s difficult for the young not to be swayed by power. It’s difficult for anyone not to be swayed by power. The young are just less likely to notice it happening.

She’s not setting out to be a starfucker, this Sandra Garcia. But if she’s not careful, it’s an easy slide into hagiography and becoming a wholly owned subsidiary. Wealth has a gravity well.

“A fashion?”

“You’d think that archaic emotions like filial piety would have long since burned away in the fires of the old man’s unrelenting *existence*. His *presence*. His sheer unwillingness to die.” I can’t stop my gloved left hand, unburdened by bandages or the bucket, from making a brief, helpless gesture. I hope it’s effective. “But that’s not how it happens in real life, is it? The situation gets . . . complicated.”

She’s all syrup and sympathy as she says, “His death was unexpected.”

“No one ever expects to get blown up. Except for maybe soldiers in a war zone.”

From the look on her face, her reblogs and uplinks must be going through the roof. I imagine the distraction of skyrocketing comments and pings. We’re going viral: BE-REAVED SON OF EXPLODED GERIOCRAST LOSES SHIT AT PUSHY INTERVIEWER.

I hope she has an escalator clause with her advertisers.

I toss another handful of scraps. Olivia quits hand-pollinating tomatoes—apparently this was all much easier before the bee colony collapse—and wanders over to collect her mower. The creak of the wheel carries through lazy insect-drone. Turning blades flash in the sun.

Marna flashes me a quote from Garcia’s liveblog: THERE IS A STRIKING INCONGRUITY TO THIS MAN—ELECT, IMMORTAL, WEALTHY, ATTENDED BY SERVANTS IN HIS GORGEOUS HOME—TOSSING FILTHY GARBAGE TO A GANG OF BIRDS WITH HIS OWN HANDS.

Funny. I never looked at myself that way.

She makes me sound like my father.

The ducks still throng around me, even though the bucket is empty. They avoid Garcia’s neighborhood, however. Garcia says, “The birds can tell us apart.”

“Birds can,” I reply. “They recognize facial features.” I lead her back to the house, Marna still flanking, and turn away to rinse my hands and the bucket under a metered

spigot. "What can I tell you about my father that you don't already know, if you've done your research?"

The ducks squabble over the scraps of sweet potato on the ground.

She says, "I'm here for your words, your perspective. Not for facts. Facts are cheap." She holds up a finger and the red gleam in the corner of her iris dies. "And my followers aren't going to bother doing the research. That's what I'm for."

She drops the finger, and we're back on the record again. Lazy people—or busy people—have been keeping journalists employed since the business was invented.

I say, "My father, William Jacobin, was two hundred and thirteen years old on the day of his death. Which was last Sunday. I assume you and your proxies and followers have heard the Jacobin name, which is why you're here—or have linked it by now. Even if you hadn't, a little simple math would tell you he was one of the first elect."

She's young—so desperately young that she actually says, "What was his exemption?"

I can't let my smile look pitying. "The exemption laws hadn't been passed yet. He got the Maddox process as soon as it entered second-stage human trials, before laws could be passed limiting it. He made his money in pharma. So he was Noruco's primary investor, and he . . . got in on the ground floor. So to speak."

"And were you a child of his youth?"

I bet she knows the answer. But half of a good interview is seeing how people navigate questions you know the answers to. And her followers *won't* know. Not unless they link it, or somebody like me—or her—tells them.

The kitchen door opens beside us. I can see over Garcia's shoulder the source of that grassy rustle of steady footsteps, the clink of a spoon against a glass. She does not turn.

Camilly, now in her white company apron, sets a tray holding three sweating glasses of pale yellow liquid on the table under the lemon tree. At that sound, Garcia glances over.

I say, "Actually, I'm a good deal younger." I pause while Camilly withdraws, escaped brown curls sticking to the sweat at the nape of her neck. "Lemonade?"

This is the second year we've had a commercial citrus crop in the Northeast, now that the weather is settled enough. My father's tree is a good deal older. Citrus doesn't come cheap. Especially since the failure of large-scale production in Florida and California—and the end of the era of inexpensive long-distance shipping. But we always had lemons, and there are limes and blood oranges and grapefruit growing in the conservatory behind the house.

"Please," she says. It's hot. And her uplinks will want the experience. I imagine she speaks from one part greed, one part dehydration, one part looking for ways to bond with her subject. Me, in this case, though I've watched journalists hone these tricks on my dad since the beginning of time.

It's a reason the best interviewers support the cost of going to meet their subjects. You learn a lot more about a person *in person*. I would bet Sandra Garcia travels more than most people, possibly even all around New England and the Mid-Atlantic.

Her followers would want to smell the air—or a bottled facsimile of it—on their uplinks. They'd want to feel the virtual grass between their toes.

If I hadn't been my father's son, I might be doing what Garcia is doing. If I hadn't been my father's son—

—am I really just the old man come again? Caught a little bit younger this time, before the wrinkles and the aching joints set in? Of course we're not really immortal, we elect—we get injured like anyone else—but the Maddox process means our bodies repair themselves a hell of a lot better. Given time . . . our bodies can repair almost anything, from failing cartilage to demyelinating neurons.

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We sit at the old painted iron picnic table beneath the tree, Marna on the far side of Ms. Garcia so as to be edited out of the pickups. The lemonade tastes fresh. Tart, sweet, complicated. Ice floats in it. It is cold enough to hurt my teeth.

Camilly's left a curl of rind in each glass to show that it's the real thing, and to perfume the drink with oils. A little more of my father's subtle brand of ostentation. As if Garcia would not have noticed that she's sitting under a mature lemon tree.

I catch myself trying to show her that I'm not my father, slowing down to savor the flavors and calories. Of course, in so doing I only ape him; William Jacobin, self-made man, would have considered it too revealing of his upbringing to squander food like some jumped-up petit bourgeois.

He'd have kept Garcia waiting forever, though. I answer her hanging question as soon as I've swallowed. "No, William was already in middle age when the Maddox process became available, but he'd frozen semen as a younger man and chose to go ahead with life extension immediately despite the reproductive side effects. His theory was that he could reproduce any time he liked. By the time he got around to it, the semen was no longer viable—and it didn't matter.

"He got his cheek scraped, had some stem cells made, and grew his own gametes in a jar, then in a surrogate. Not quite in his own kitchen, although I'll show you what it's like before you go. You wouldn't doubt it was a facility adequate for genetic engineering while simultaneously catering a wedding dinner for seven hundred guests."

"This was his house?"

"A trivial expense to keep it habitable through peak and post. Just as it was a trivial expense to put me through the process as my eighteenth birthday gift—even though, by then, the tax penalties were exorbitant."

Those penalties exist to keep the immortality process exclusive. A club inhabited by the richest and most powerful—those able to afford a process and maintenance treatments that are already expensive beyond the means of most.

The taxes can be waived by government order—and are, in the case of certain scientists, statespersons, and other "indispensables." But Garcia will never be one, and neither will Marna—unless I talk her into letting me pay for it, which would take a bigger miracle than getting her to go to bed with me—and neither will any of Garcia's followers. Not unless they're on track to win a Nobel, and I doubt most of those people follow gossip blogs.

Although . . . people can surprise you.

The ducks have gotten bored with us and wandered off to pick among the tomato plants. Unlike chickens, they will not damage most vegetables. But they're hell on soft fruits like strawberries. We still grow strawberries—fall and winter—but we grow them in hanging baskets around the edge of the porch. It's too hot in the spring and summer, anyway.

Marna's glass clicks on the table. She holds up a finger, and the light in Garcia's eye dies away.

Marna says, "Did you know that William Jacobin was one of the people most instrumental in bringing about the exemption laws? He liked his little club exclusive."

Apprehension tingles in my fingertips. Garcia leans forward. "Tell me more."

Marna lifts her glass from a sharp, moist ring on the tabletop. Excitement or emphasis makes her gesture a little too sharply; the lemonade splashes over her fingers. She pauses to suck them clean. She scoffs and says, "We couldn't have five hundred million undying middle managers cluttering up the landscape. You think housing situations and opportunities for promotion are limited now! Much better to make it too expensive for anyone who isn't *our kind of people*, isn't that right, dear?"

She glances at me. Is she trying to make us look like lovers?

Could we be lovers, with my father gone?

What do I have to do to get this woman to sleep with me?

Garcia's glossed lips thin. I wonder if she tried to do anything else before taking herself into business as a member of the so-called creative class. (Is interviewing rich people creative? I'm surely the last person anyone should ask.)

Marna continues, "Besides, think of the costs in terms of divorce litigation if *nobody* had any hope of outliving the bastard."

I bite my lip, fighting to maintain my deadpan. I succeed . . . for whole moments. Then I snort, my lip curls, and I begin to laugh hard and sharp while Garcia looks from Marna to me and back again, her angelic brow revealing the shadows of lines that will eventually crease it whether she's puzzled or not. It's a tiny little window through time, a glimpse of an unavoidable future.

Marna leans back and lowers her hand. *Resume transmission.*

Garcia's still struggling with it while I stand, as hard and sharp as I laughed. I snatch up my glass and say, "Let's take this inside, shall we?"

We troop across a sandstone patio and through the sliding doors, where I introduce Ms. Garcia to the house. "Charmed," the house says. It begins a series of offerings that I have to interrupt to silence. I'll have to get Camilly to reprogram that. I prefer my domiciles unobtrusive.

Inside, it's dim and airy. The living space is high-ceilinged and white-walled, with solar shades drawn across the windows. This old house stays cool in the heat, with its deep porches and lazily rotating ceiling fans. The windows have been sealed and the place is silent enough that I can hear the soft creak of wide floorboards beneath the pile of thick Oriental carpets older than all three of us added together. Older than my father, too, if he were here.

I usher my guests into a small sitting room, touch the wall to let the house know to let Camilly know where we are, and make sure the ladies are seated before I drop my own butt on a couch.

"Where were we?" I ask rhetorically. "Oh, the elect. And my history with my father. You know what they call us in the streets? The parasites. And I'd feel the same if our positions were reversed. Hell, our positions *aren't* reversed, and I'm pretty sure they're right about us."

"All right," Garcia says. "I'll play. Do you want to open up the Maddox process to everyone? How would we afford it? How would we support it? What about the population curve? What about opportunities for the young?"

"That wouldn't be as much of a problem if people stopped having babies. Since the process results in sterility, that should be effortless."

But she's on to my deadpan now, no matter how much bitterness I steep my tone in. She smirks; the chase is *to be continued*. "As your father did?"

"It's two primal and conflicting human urges, isn't it? The desire to reproduce yourself, and the desire to live forever. What I'm saying is that maybe evolution had it right, and we shouldn't be living forever."

Marna's leaned back, draped an arm across the back of the loveseat upon which she half-reclines. She's looking at me with pursed lips, a speculative expression.

It occurs to me that I've never actually said any of this stuff out loud in front of her before. Possibly not in front of anyone. I feel brave. A little giddy.

*Congratulations*, Garcia said. *Congratulations*.

I'm so busy remembering what she did a few minutes ago that I miss what she says now, and have to replay it before I can answer. And once I hear it, and actually register it, I'm too stunned to gather my thoughts.

She has drained her lemonade and set the glass down decisively on a coaster. What she asked is, "So, at least on an ideological level, you're saying you support the assassination of people like yourself and your father?"

"Assassination?!"

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And just like that, she's won. I sit gaping; Garcia leans forward eagerly. She flashes me a link; I'd filtered out my feeds. And been doubly concerned with ignoring them once my attention wandered that first time.

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION TAKES OVER JACOBIN MURDER, the headline says. ANTI-TERRORISM SQUAD CONFIDENT OF IMMINENT ARREST.

Marna holds up her finger. "They just say that to try to flush out the perpetrator."

"There's not *supposed* to be a perpetrator!" It's a second before I actually realize what I said. That I said anything at all. It bursts out in a kind of channeled explosion, rage and frustration. *Fuel cells don't just explode.*

Marna stands. "Ms. Garcia? I'll show you out. The interview is at an end."

When she comes back, she sits down on the sofa beside me. She reaches out and takes my unbandaged hand. She says, "Eddie—"

"They killed him?"

She shakes her dark ponytail. "I think that's still up in the air. But if they've called in the F.B.I., they must think they have—at least—something. Or maybe they're getting pressure from somebody with a political agenda."

I gather myself sufficiently for sarcasm. Atypically, it's an effort. "Have you ever met somebody *without* a political agenda?"

"It's an East African Plains Ape thing to have," she agrees.

*Somebody blew up my father. And they nearly blew up me.* "Marna. You're from a good Natural family. Surely one of your many siblings or cousins or aunties must have a pronounced opinion on our relationship?"

I'm not sure I've ever seen Marna look awkward before. "I let it bounce off me."

"Well, I guess those must be no uncertain terms. I know you have your own opinions—"

"I think your dad and those like him are a blight. That's not a surprise to you."

"But you work for me."

"We all work for the geriatocracy one way or another, Eddie. In my case, it's just a little more direct than most. And it's not like you asked to get cloned." She pats my knee. "I was surprised by and proud of what you said today."

The look she gives me is a hell of a lot less exasperated than the last one. I can't stand the curl of anxiety that rises in my gut under the steadiness of her regard. *Does that mean you might consent to sleep with me?*

For the love of all that's holy, Eddie. Get over it. An unwelcome attraction isn't pretty on anybody, man.

I say, "It's not like we can escape from them. Like you can escape from us, I mean."

"Not without a revolution," she agrees. Tiredness and frustration crease her face. The lines on her brow never smooth entirely away.

"Christ," I say. "I need a drink. You want one? This place makes a great Bohemian. I hear they grow and squeeze the grapefruit themselves."

"Hah!" she says. And, "Should you be mixing alcohol and painkillers?"

As I drop a text to Camilly, it occurs to me that I might be spoiled. That doesn't stop me from wanting the drink. I'm still thinking about it, letting my head fall back against the divan and damn the soreness where it presses my healing neck and shoulders, when the house says, "Edward Jacobin, this is the police. We have a warrant; you will facilitate our immediate entry!" in a voice I'm used to hearing only on TV.

"House?"

"They appear to be legitimate," the house says. "They used a valid override to pass the gate."

Marna has jumped up off the divan, an unfocused look on her face. She says, "The warrant's genuine. Eddie, I'm—"

"Edward, open the door!"

They could override, and I could override, and then they'll just break it down. And it's not as if we have anything to hide. Lemonade's not a controlled substance yet, as long as there's under nine grams of sugar in it.

I think about waiting to see if they'll actually say *We know you're in there*, but some things aren't worth experimenting with. They must think I had something to do with my father's death. Isn't that the way it always goes? They look first at the family.

Fortunately, I have a really good lawyer.

Marna beside me, I start walking toward the door. "House, let them in."

The door doesn't crash, because house opens it. And then my father's Oriental car-pets are trampled under a dozen black boots as men and women broad with body armor pour into my front parlor. They have weapons. They look official. I'd shoot a quick text to Camilly to let her know not to risk coming out of the kitchen, but I'm not getting any signal.

That's the sickest-making, most disorienting thing of all.

I put my hands up and keep walking toward them. "Officers," I say to a forest of face shields, "I think this is a little extreme. If you'll just explain the nature of the complaint, I'd be happy to come in and discuss it with you—"

"Sir!" an officer—or an agent, I guess? They could be the F.B.I.—shouts, "Get down!" She grabs me by the elbow and tosses me aside, a sort of whirl and a sling. I expect somebody to tackle me, hands wrenching my arms behind my back.

Instead there's more shouting, but nobody touches me. I cover my head with my hands reflexively; when I collect myself enough to peek out again, two men in body armor are patting Marna down. One of them says, "Marna Davies, you are under arrest for conspiracy to commit murder, murder in the first degree, conspiracy to commit terrorism, and carrying out acts of terrorism on U.S. soil. You have the right to remain silent. If you choose to remain silent, you may be subject to enhanced interrogation techniques. You have the right to an attorney but you do not have the right to private consultation with that attorney—"

Nobody is paying any attention to me. I push myself to my knees. Her head cranes as they're leading her out. She's looking for me.

She did it. She really did it. Maybe not with her own hands, but she was involved.

"Marna?"

She opens her mouth as if to say something. Thinks better of it. Closes it again and just smiles. She winks at me, and she smiles.

If they dragged her out of the house, if they were rough with her, I might have hurled myself at somebody. Probably gotten myself shot. But she strides along like a queen in chains, and they . . . escort her.

I follow down the steps to where cars are waiting, long and black with tinted windows. They stuff her into the back of one. An officer places her hand on Marna's head to guide it into the car without striking the doorframe.

She catches my eye once more before the door thuds shut between us. An officer is left standing beside me. He says, "We'll want you to come with us, Mr. Jacobin. We have some questions."

I can't make myself look at him. "You really think she killed my father?"

He says, "You know I can't discuss that with you."

But she didn't look surprised.

She looks too small in that big black car ever to change the world. And she is—too small alone. As are we all.

But she's not alone, is she? I like to think *I* wouldn't stoop to murder. But I'm not sure she was wrong.

So Marna will go to jail. And my father is dead. But I'm just getting started.

I wonder how hard it will be to contact Ms. Garcia. ○

# RED LEGACY

Eneasz Brodski

**Eneasz Brodski was born in Communist Poland. He tells us, "my parents escaped it before my first birthday, and they're still pretty sure that was a solid decision. Now I live in Denver. I've just moved to the suburbs, despite my extreme distrust of all things suburban, because love can get you to try crazy things . . . and who knows, maybe it's not as bad as I remember. When I'm not writing or working my day job I produce a podcast of Rationalist Fiction, trying to help this newborn genre grow by releasing some of its best works for free at [hpmorpodcast.com](http://hpmorpodcast.com)." His tale of a hot battle for dominance during the cold war is his first published story.**

## Overture

I hold my daughter tightly as she disgorges a torrent of thick, jaundiced fluid from her lungs. She spasms in my arms, her body contorting in motions more akin to vomiting than coughing. I push my fingers into her mouth and scoop out what sticky remains I can.

It is late and the lab is quiet, aside from the sounds of Alexia's struggle. Deep within the subterranean compound, bare light bulbs illuminate all corners of the room. Harsh white glare glints off the stainless steel frame of the gurney nearby, which I will transfer Alexia to yet again. The light glistens on her slick skin. Her naked body is coated in pale yellow mucus. A splash of it oozes from the tank I pulled her from, splatters across the floor between her birth place and my arms.

I strike her back sharply and a final clump of the sludge bursts from her lips. She gasps frantically, pulling air into these lungs for the first time, her fingernails digging into my side. She hacks, sending spittle flying, clearing her airway, shaking my body. For two minutes this continues, the volume of her lungs so much greater than it had been the first time she'd been born, eight years ago. Finally the wracking subsides and she clutches at me. She wails, and I want to wail with her, even after all these iterations. I'm glad to feel her pain. When the day comes that I fail to cry with her, I will no longer need to bring her back.

I wrap her in a scratchy wool blanket and wait for the terror of rebirth to fade. She looks up at me, clear blue eyes rimmed in red. Her blonde hair is pasted down with the slime, starting to crust around the edges. A newly hatched chick, the shell of her incubating tank abandoned. Her memory will be fuzzy for a couple of days. I brace myself for the question. Every single time, that same first question. My chest is heavy—I no longer have hope it'll be different this time.

"Momma . . . where's Mommy?" Alexia's voice will be lilting and high by tomorrow, but now it's still quavering and weak. I am Momma, and Natasha is Mommy. I

unclench my jaw with a force of will. Inside my chest, a feeling like glass shards grinding together.

"She's very busy right now. If she leaves her project it will fail, so she can't be here. You'll see her again, in a couple of weeks."

The lie was easy even the first time I told it. I do not hate Natasha for necessitating the lie. Childhood is a structure of lies we build around our children to provide them with the shelter they need to grow. Without that protection they would be warped and stunted by the hostility of the human environment. Rather, I hate Natasha for being too weak to build the shelter with me. I am alone and the work is unceasing. Alexia deserves a life supported by two parents. On my own I fail her every day.

But first she must live. I note the time of Alexia's first breath. She's plateaued at approximately sixteen days, ten hours for five iterations. My usual worry is starting to turn to dread.

## 1—The Brit

**T**he Arkhipov facility, built entirely underground in a remote corner of the Ural Mountains, was meant to provide Marya Kovanich with the opportunity for uninterrupted research. A hidden airstrip, revealed for a few hours every six months, allowed for the rotation of the live-in personnel and the arrival of fresh supplies. A small nuclear reactor provided for all their power needs.

Within the sterile confines of the compound, Marya pushed Lamarck's discoveries to their limits. Jean-Baptiste Lamarck was the first to demonstrate how parents passed acquired characteristics to their offspring. He showed how the primitive giraffes—spending their lives stretching their necks to reach higher fruit—would bear children with necks slightly longer than their peers. Unfortunately nature was slow. Organisms could not pass on their refined genes if they did not survive the refining process. As such, adaptations accrued at a glacial pace, limited to responses to the small fraction of stressors that pushed improvements without going so far as to kill an organism outright.

Soviet cloning advances removed this limitation. A dead specimen could be sampled, its tissue used to grow a copy with the exact genetic code it carried at the time of death. Now massive stressors could push large changes, and the cloning tanks would preserve those changes. Marya, together with her research partner and lover Natasha, was tasked with finding practical applications. While the capitalists poured their resources into ever more complicated computing devices and sterile "integrated circuits," the people of Russia put their trust in living, breathing, biological solutions. Russia's wealth had always been its people, and Russia would invest in its people, not in soulless machinery.

Now, two years since the facility's opening, Marya Kovanich received her first direct orders. Her exploratory phase was over. Tensions with the Americans were rising and she was to provide the people with a method of surviving catastrophic radioactive fallout.

Immediately she put the facility's nuclear reactor to use. Killing humans was monstrously unethical. In addition, their reproductive rates were too slow for quick results. But the human body was host to thousands of microorganisms, and if one of them could be modified to purge radioactive elements from its surroundings, its hosts could live in an irradiated environment in comfort. She experimented on dozens of bacterial species, harvested from her own body, which she bombarded with heavy radiation daily. They fried under the false uranium sun. Their clones lived again the next day, and went back to the nuclear furnace.

It was four weeks into the project, in the silent hours of darkened lights, that klaxons ripped Marya from sleep. The ear-shattering blast launched her from her bed, sheets tangling her feet. She lurched across her cramped quarters on instinct, mind

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not fully awake. She tore open the door to Alexia's room. The child's bed was empty. Her daughter was gone.

Her heart restarted when she remembered that this was an interim period. Alexia died days ago, the bed had been empty since then. It would remain so for another couple of weeks. Her daughter was safe, so long as the cloning labs were undisturbed.

Marya spun around, yanked her lab coat from the hook by the door, and rushed into the hallway. She shrugged the coat on as she hurried to the facility's center, reached back to pull her frazzled dark hair from under it. It hadn't been lustrous and wavy in a long time. She no longer cared for it, now that Natasha had gone.

The guards saluted as she walked into the control center, the doors hissed open at her arrival. Most of the room was filled with the bulk of the giant BESM computer, rows of metal cabinets stuffed with transistor relays. Three large consoles stood against one wall, racks of blinking lights looming over expansive keypads. There wasn't much room for humans within, and even less now that anxious techs stood clustered around two men by the monitors. Boris, who had taken over Natasha's position when she'd left, spoke with Ivan. Boris was a scrawny geek like her, sporting thick glasses and partial to pocket protectors. Ivan took up the volume of two Boris—thick arms, a barrel chest, a Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder. His face was lined with the creases of too much war. He caught her eye as she entered and turned away from Boris to approach her.

"Madam."

"What is the situation?" Marya asked.

"Two guards have been found dead, the bodies look to have been dragged into a janitorial closet."

The implications of "dragged" were clear.

"Murder? When?"

"The bodies were still warm. The intruder is still about."

"An intruder? That's impossible! This facility is only known to the highest officials!"

"I pulled a 7.62mm bullet from one of the men myself," Ivan replied. "We don't use that caliber. My instincts say the British. MI6 agents love the Walther PPK."

Marya's heart leapt into her throat. MI6 here was a disaster. They would steal the research she'd been so carefully cultivating. They would destroy the tanks, kill her daughter. They would murder them all, given half a chance.

"Find him!" she hissed. "By any means! He cannot live!"

Ivan's eyes flashed brief annoyance, but otherwise he remained professional.

"Lockdown procedures are already in place," he stated. "The exits are sealed, and soon we'll begin the sweep—"

He was interrupted by the muffled thump and accompanying tremor of a distant explosion. Marya glared at him. He turned to scan the facility schematics mapped onto a full wall of the control room—six maps, one for each floor of the underground complex. Each room was labeled, and by each label a tiny lightbulb protruded from the wall. Just now the bulb beside "Armory" was flashing rapidly, indicating damage.

"He will not escape from there." Ivan snapped her a salute and stomped from the room. He bellowed for men once in the hall, calling them to his side by name, but left the two guards at the door.

Marya studied the map herself, sucking at her front teeth. She forced her spine straight and her mouth tight—the appearance of command was vital, regardless of the pained liquid feeling in her bowels. What was she supposed to do now? There was nothing to do but wait, staring at a map that told her nothing. She wracked her brain for contingency plans, possible failure modes and vulnerabilities. She must not lose control.

The Brits were dangerous—they'd never killed off their nobility. Long before Lamarck, ancient societies had stumbled upon simple rules that crudely took advantage of evolution. They restricted governing and warfare to an elite class, and expected

intermarriage within that class. The nobles. This ensured that genetic alterations that gave advantages in combat were preserved and passed down, rather than diluted with genes that optimized farming or banking. Militarily, these societies outperformed those without a noble class.

When the nobles grew decadent and abusive, the French and the Russians eliminated their noble lines. The English had preserved theirs, and still recruited their officers and special operatives from those august ranks. Centuries of selective adaptation had produced a killer elite. Even during lulls between wars the nobility continued to duel amongst themselves, and spent extravagant amounts of leisure time hunting foxes or other game. Dispensing death was literally in their genes. While her guards would empty entire magazines of ammunition in an attempt to hit a man, an MI6 agent could put a bullet into someone's eye at a hundred paces, while running.

Her brooding was shattered by the thunderous chatter of automatic weapons fire just outside the door. A single extended burst rang out, hammering at her ears. One of the guards outside flopped across the doorway like a sack of meat, blood seeping from his punctured uniform and pooling around him.

Marya stared, speechless, and before she could think to react an absurdly over-dressed Englishman jumped the body—a pistol gripped in one hand, a commandeered Kalashnikov in the other. He pointed the weapons at them and quickly scanned the room. Then he relaxed, and smirked. Every Russian hand was raised in surrender. He kicked the body back into the hall without looking at it.

"Well, well," he drawled. "Looks like the fox has found the hen house." His Russian was excellent, if strongly accented. His idiom didn't translate well. With a casual motion he dropped the AK, thumbed the sliding door closed, and moved the pistol to his right hand. Marya shrunk away, eyes darting to the map. The armory was the most distant room. Ivan would not be back for some time. The MI6 agent strolled into the room, toward the command console, waving them back with his gun. He tracked blood as he walked, the heel of his left shoe leaving a series of wet, red treads across the floor.

Marya tried to breathe as quietly as possible. She edged back until she was pressed against a computer cabinet. To her left Boris stood rooted to the spot. The agent eyed them coolly.

"I have some work to do here, so if you would all stay back and keep quiet, I shan't have to kill you." He flashed them a cocky smile, all sharp teeth and genial charm, then swung his pistol back at the door and fired twice into its control panel. It sparked as it died, and the door immediately slid into the wall and locked open. That was a standard security feature. The external doors worked in the opposite manner—any damage to their control consoles would lock them shut. A piercing alarm filled the room, its wailing drowning out the klaxons, and the light by "Control Center" on the wall map began flashing frantically. The agent frowned.

"Bugger. Looks like I'll have to do this the messy way." His gun was somehow already pointing at them. He swung his head around to match. "Good-bye, Doctor Kovanich."

Marya's heart stopped. Her scream hadn't even made it to her lips when the pistol flared, jerked in the man's hand, and spat a single copper-coated fragment of lead. It punched through Boris's chest, boring a hole through his heart, and exited from his back in a spiral of blood. It hadn't even nicked a rib. Boris looked surprised as bright red spilled from his chest and back, flowed down his pristine white coat, splattered the floor. His eyes said what she thought—"But I'm not Kovanich." Then he collapsed.

Marya looked up, uncomprehending. The British agent was tearing at the bullet-proof cover over the big red button, clearly marked "SELF-DESTRUCT! DO NOT PRESS!" He knew her name. Knew that Kovanich headed this facility. But he'd shot Boris because . . . because he was a man? Did he not know that the Socialist Republic did not harbor his medieval views of leadership?

She forced down the relief threatening to flood her body. She was alive now because an English nobleman couldn't imagine a woman being anything more than an assistant. His regime was doomed. The British may have a few centuries' head start, but they were crippled by their regressive traditions. The combined efforts of the free and equal Soviet People would race past them in a matter of decades.

The agent managed to lever the protective shell from the switch at last. A countdown display above it was poised at 15 minutes, 00 seconds. He tossed her a quick glare, all arrogance and contempt, then slammed his hand down on the self-destruct button. One hundred thousand volts of electricity coursed through him as his body completed the circuit between the metal plate on the floor and the metal button he'd just pushed. The lights in the facility dimmed to almost nothing, the whir of the ventilation system dropped off, cut out by the sudden massive power drain. His body spasmed violently for several seconds, smoking, and the smell of burnt hair filled the room.

Marya hadn't really expected anyone to fall for that.

## 2—The Russian

**M**arya squeezed her eyes shut in frustration. Uri Pushkin peered over Marya's shoulder with a clipboard, tapping his pen in a steady rhythm. He was one of Russia's senior auditors, reporting directly to the Kremlin, and undoubtedly both his parents had been paper pushers of some sort. Administrative work ran in his blood, just as scientific work ran in Marya's. Both Marya's parents and all four grandparents had scientific or academic careers.

Natasha didn't have quite the pedigree that Marya did—her paternal grandparents had been simple farmers. This was unfortunate, as they had decided that Natasha would carry their child. She was the more maternal one. She had a desire to carry the child that Marya couldn't quite understand, but was grateful for. To compensate for Natasha's less refined genetics, they had chosen one of the greatest scientific minds in Russia as the donor to father Alexia. He boasted intellectual ancestors going back three generations on his father's side, and two on his mother's.

Normally the nature of sexual attraction prevented such a concentrated genetic accumulation of one skill. As often as not a great banker may marry a great poet, rather than another great banker. The adaptations that parents had accumulated through a lifetime of labor were diluted in their children through the mismatch between skills. Not even the Brits had avoided this problem with their noble class, as only the men were allowed to fight. Invariably much of the genetic progress was lost.

The Soviet People were systematically destroying these impediments. All careers were open to both genders, so finally great male warriors could be paired with great female warriors to produce truly startling children. The government encouraged and subsidized marriages between those in similar fields, particularly between the most skilled. It would not be long until the glorious shining children, and the children's children, would inherit the earth.

In the meantime, the knowledge that Pushkin was likely among the best paper-pushers in the motherland didn't reduce the face-clawing irritation of his bean-counting by a single jot.

"No," Marya forced through clenched teeth, "We are *not* on budget. I dipped heavily into the research ledgers to pay for the repairs. It only seems balanced because we put Boris's project on hold for two months after his death. We need an increased research budget to make up that shortfall. And now that our secrecy has been compromised we need far more guards."

"And what do the people get for this lavish expenditure of their wealth?" Uri asked. "We have not seen any returns yet. Your facility has a capitalist's appetite, and nothing to show for it."

Marya rose from her seat and spun on the little man. She glared into his old eyes, hidden behind thick glasses. She stood almost a head taller than him, the harsh lights glinting off his liver-spotted skin.

"You want to see results? Come with me and I'll show you what we've done, even under such hostile conditions!"

She turned and walked from the office. The left side of her lab coat flared out behind her. The right side only shifted slightly, weighed down by the semi-automatic pistol in her coat pocket. She'd taken it off the dead agent; it went everywhere with her now.

The auditor scurried to catch up. She needed to keep him distracted, keep him from digging too far into the numbers. The MI6 attack had been a blessing and a curse—the resulting chaos had allowed her to bury over a year of financial malfeasance, but it had brought unwanted attention down on them. Alexia was unauthorized work. It wasn't cheap cloning a human child every month, and it was hard to hide those expenses.

"You'll be happy to note that we can reduce our senior research headcount by one," she spoke over her shoulder, "I've taken over all of Boris's projects and he won't need to be replaced." This had consolidated her power. She needed it to keep some of the more idiotic junior researchers quiet. The security grunts were told that Alexia was a government-approved project, but the research staff knew better. Some of them had to be bribed, others threatened.

They rounded a corner, approaching the upper labs. "This first project has been underway for two years, and is nearing completion. To the left, through those first doors, you'll find we—"

Marya's voice caught as Natasha's flowing blond hair flashed across the hallway, darting into a door on the left, a single streak of glorious color in their drab surroundings. No, not Natasha's, she'd been gone for months. Alexia's—the tiny spitting image of Natasha, from her fine blond hair to her stubby toes. Heat flared through Marya's body and suddenly her labcoat seemed constricting, suffocating. Had Uri seen that? He must have. Hell and damnation, he'd seen Alexia. Tightness closed around Marya's throat. There were no children on record in the facility. They would take her daughter away, shut down her project.

A grim resolve rose from deep within, clearing the tightness in her throat. They were almost at the elevator doors. Still unrepaired, they yawned open over a dark five-floor fall. Uri would have a tragic accident. The poor man wasn't watching where he was walking. It was unfortunate that the people had lost someone of his skill and breeding, due to simple carelessness. She tensed her shoulders, planted her feet.

Uri walked directly into her and nearly fell to the floor, fumbling his clipboard. The man really hadn't been watching where he was walking, and peered up at her with a flustered look. Marya blinked at him incredulously. He hadn't seen Alexia?

"Why have we stopped?" he asked. "Are we here?"

"Yes, right this way," she recovered quickly and waved open the doors to her right, pushing him in.

"I thought we were going left?"

"What? Oh, no, left is the women's lavatory. Come along." Faintly she heard what might have been a young girl's giggle. Unacceptable. Alexia had been told not to leave her room while the auditor was here. She didn't realize the lives she was risking by playing like this.

And yet Marya knew she wouldn't punish her. Alexia had only a few days of health in every iteration, and Marya couldn't mar those. Afterward came the quick decline and degeneration. She would have to find some other solution.

"Here we have . . ." Marya looked around the room to orient herself, "Doctor Yu's cartographic microbes." She led him to a wide metal table. Preserved under glass was what appeared to be a pig's heart, if it had been made of soap flakes. It looked weightless, and apt to crumble at the slightest touch. The walls of the object were so thin she could see into the heart itself, but not quite all the way through it.

"Dr. Yu's microbes permeate an organic substance and map it out," she explained. "They then recreate the structure with thin cellular scaffolding. Any organic substance can be mapped. This pig's heart is the largest organ thus recreated." That was a lie, the heart was smaller than a human child's brain. "We're still verifying that it's an exact duplicate." Another lie. Alexia was proof enough that the duplication was exact.

"Remarkable!" Uri nodded and ticked something on his clipboard. "However, I fail to see the practical applications. Cloning is already a proven technology. And this is not what you have been tasked with producing?"

Marya's hands twisted into clenched talons of frustration. The fool! She held the keys to life itself. She could make a reproducible copy of anyone's brain. Never again would a freak accident or an assassin's bullet cut short the work of a great mind. She could make Comrade Stalin proof against death itself.

Her right eye twitched as she forced her hands to relax. No, this man would not be told. When she was ready she would present her findings to Stalin in person. When she neutered death, defeated mankind's last great adversary, even the capitalists would come crawling to Russia's feet. The corners of her lips twisted upward and she struggled to contain a grim laugh. They hate us, and yet we will save them. We will save everyone.

Until then, she still had this paper-pusher to deal with.

"Fine. Come with me."

Marya led them from the room, through the double doors and turned right. Several meters in front of her Alexia was kneeling on the floor, drawing on the wall with a crayon. Marya almost gasped aloud and spun around, hands flung out. Uri was just stepping from the room. She rushed forward and pushed him down the hall, back the way they came.

"Wait," he protested, "isn't this the wrong way?" He craned his neck to look down the hall.

Drop bears. She could lead him into the room with the drop bears. They were still wildly uncontrollable and would tear him to pieces in a minute. So unfortunate, he took a wrong turn looking for the bathroom. She raised her arms to force him forward.

"Or maybe not, I do get turned around in these underground lairs." He gave up trying to look around her body. She wasn't extraordinarily large, but the lab coat widened her frame, and he was extraordinarily small. He shuffled forward as she lagged behind, breathing shallowly.

Twice now. Unbelievable. She swallowed and stepped to him, careful to stay between him and Alexia—should he happen to turn around—until they were safely down a side corridor.

Several minutes later they stood in the main laboratory. The room was in use, several techs milling about trying to look busy while staying within earshot of Marya and her guest. They pretended to look into microscopes, or fiddled with the controls of the cloning tanks, or scribbled numbers in notebooks. A deep hum pervaded the room, coming from the wide far wall. Marya took Uri toward it.

"You can't tell by looking," Marya said, "but this wall is heavily shielded, plated with several centimeters of lead. If it wasn't, the radiation from the other side would sicken you in a matter of hours. If you were exposed to it for more than a few days you would start to develop tumors and open sores. Within a few months you'd be dead."

A severe-looking door punctured the wall, gunmetal grey, with the large latch lever and locking dog-wheel normally found on submarines. A view slit was set at eye level, closed with a sliding cover four centimeters thick.

"Behind that door is your radiophage. Take a look. A few seconds through the view slit won't hurt."

Uri approached the door reluctantly. He rested his hand on the bolt at the end of the cover and glanced back at Marya. She gave him a smirk and cocked her head. He turned back to the door, hesitated, then slid the cover from the glass view slit.

Brilliant red light burst from the space beyond that door. It shone fiercely, flooding over the grey of the lab with a brilliance the color of autumn leaves set alight. It was steady, unwavering, and dazzling as a bottled sunset. For an infinite moment all movement ceased, and the world was shining crimson. With a jerk Uri slammed the cover back into place and the lab dropped back to dull tones. Finally every chest fell as every held breath was slowly exhaled.

"What . . . what was . . ." Uri spoke, but he hadn't turned away from the door. His hand still rested on the slit cover.

"The bacteria absorb a lot of energy, in the form of ionizing radiation. They thrive on it, needing no other food supply, but even so it is far more than they can absorb. The excess energy must be released in some way, or it will destroy them. In this case, it is converted into bioluminescence. Prodigious amounts of it. That is the red light you saw."

"That is stunning." He turned to face her, eyes wondering. "You have succeeded then?"

Marya shook her head.

"Not yet. We are still working to find a way to integrate the bacteria into a living host. This strain is immediately attacked by our test animals' immune systems and destroyed in a matter of days. We're only halfway there."

"Nonetheless," Uri replied, "I think the people can continue research in this vein. Your expenses will have to be curtailed a bit, but—" He stopped, and his eyes shifted to something past Marya. "Hello . . . who's this?"

Marya's blood froze solid. She held her head stiff and turned on her heels. The room moved around her and Alexia swung into her vision, drifting from her periphery into her focus. She stood in the doorway, eyes shining, smiling meekly.

Marya staggered back one step, then another. This was it then. Her hand crept into her coat pocket, her eyes darted to Uri's face. There were witnesses . . . those here now knew Uri had to die. No point in being clever. Her hand closed on the pistol in her deep labcoat pocket. The Walther PPK. The others would have no doubts about her resolve now. This action would speak louder than a hundred threats.

"There aren't any children listed at this facility," Uri said. The question was implicit in his statement. Marya met his eyes and wondered at the lightness in her head, the feeling of weightlessness like that when stepping off a ledge. Free, and helpless. Her palm was already slick with sweat. She flicked off the safety and tightened her grip on the gun. It was time.

"Momma?"

Marya didn't look back. Her arm trembled as she began to pull the gun from her pocket.

"Alexia!" scolded a nearby man, crossing to her in three long, loping strides and sweeping the girl into his arms. "Papa told you not to bother us in here! You'll get me in trouble with Doctor Kovanich!" The man was young, probably a technician. Marya didn't recognize him. His hair was dark black, but his eyes matched Alexia's blue. He held her tightly and turned to Marya, looking deeply chagrined.

"I'm so sorry," he said, lowering his head, "I promised this wouldn't happen." He looked at Uri Pushkin. "I accept full responsibility. I told Doctor Kovanich that her

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transfer was approved, but the paperwork is still processing. But my daughter, she has no one else, now that her mother . . . she . . .”

And Alexia, as if on cue, started crying. She struck the strange man with a closed fist, pulling from his arms, but he pulled her tight and hurried from the room, making shushing noises the while. He cast Marya an anxious look as he left. Marya smiled faintly and dropped her hand back into her pocket as subtly as she could. She had only pulled it out to the wrist.

Uri looked from the vacated doorway to her with a quizzical expression.

“Is it safe for Marya to be here?”

“It’s safer than the city. Our dangers are known and controlled. And she has nowhere else.” She was amazed at how steady her voice was. She held on to the solid metal weight of the gun, let it ground her.

“Yes . . . Why did she call you Momma?”

Marya shrugged. Her pulse quickened and she put her finger back into the trigger-guard.

“Everyone defers to me. Maybe she picked up on that. She’s been calling me Momma Kova for weeks.”

“Hm. Well, our strength is our children. I don’t wish to insult the great intellects gathered here, but child education is a tricky thing, yes?” Marya stiffened, then braced herself for what she had to do. “I believe I can find a way to expand your budget a bit, to allow the hiring of a tutor. Do you have spare living quarters?”

She nearly choked holding back the gasp of laughter that tried to burst from her chest. She relaxed her arm, let her death grip on the pistol grow slack. A tutor would mean one more person to keep subdued, one more vector to keep controlled. But she could deal with that later. The Kremlin would have their man back, and he was bringing them a glowing report.

### Entr’acte

I watch my daughter as she floats in a tank of liquid sunshine. She does not breathe yet, that will come tomorrow. Now she is still, her eyes closed, her hair drifting about her head in a golden halo. Her skin has just begun growing, it is so thin it’s still transparent. I can see the diminutive pink musculature below, and the veins a web-work of lapis lazuli.

It is quiet. Not silent, it is never silent in the complex. There is a warm hum of machinery. Distantly, fans push fresh air through the vast ducts. Occasionally water gurgles through pipes. It is the quiet of a living thing slumbering. I’ve turned off all the lights I can. From the doorway comes a dim spill of light from a remote hallway bulb. The interior of the lab is brushed with the glow of a muted yellow sun. The incubation tank’s lights are never shut off. They glitter and refract through the liquid, illuminating Alexia, and washing the lab in shimmering amber waves.

Sixteen days and ten hours of life. At least it’s better than what we had at first, back when there was a “we.” I had delayed too long in taking a tissue sample from Alexia. I didn’t want to clone a brain-dead child, or an infant in the body of an eight-year-old. That would not be Alexia, it would be someone new who was growing up with her DNA. So I waited until we were sure that the cartographic microbes could fully map out a human-sized brain and reproduce its connectome scaffolding. By then Alexia was so weak she couldn’t feed herself.

Natasha was with me at the start. Together we could move mountains. Together we would change the world. But neither of us had been ready for how quickly the

cancer came back. I had thought it was horrifying the first time, watching our child crumble from a vibrant ball of curiosity to a wasted skeleton in three months' time. After the first resurrection Alexia had only two days of good health. Then her body folded, succumbing fully to the leukemia after eight days of struggle. I knew how hard it would be, but even I couldn't think for days afterward. Couldn't feel. I barely ate. Natasha took it even worse.

I place one hand on the glass of the incubation tank. It is warm, thirty degrees. Alexia's nutrient bath is held at body temperature, and though I know she cannot perceive anything yet, I am comforted that it is a pleasant embrace.

Natasha left before the leukemia was cured. Even though Alexia was getting better. Every iteration she lasted longer, her body fought harder. It was working and Natasha left anyway. The weight of the work is just enough to crush me slowly on my own. Every month I slip a little further down the slope, straining against the boulder that we'd pushed so far. I see the centimeters I lose, and if I could only push a bit harder I could regain them.

Now the leukemia is gone entirely, defeated by Alexia's refined body. I have hopes that she'll never have any form of cancer in her life. But Alexia's system still crashes after approximately 394 hours. There is a flaw in the neurological template. Something went wrong, something that cascades into complete biological failure. Something that eludes me, and damns me.

I don't remember how many iterations it's been since the sixteen-day-and-ten-hour plateau. I could check in my notebook, but I don't bother. I should be systematically hunting down the error. Controlling for variables, forming hypotheses and eliminating them methodically. I should have several tanks running at once, and reams upon reams of notes filled with comparative graphs, data analysis, post-mortems.

But I have an entire facility to administer, a research directive from the Kremlin, and a sick child to care for as a single mother. I don't want to feel grateful for the weeks she is dead, weeks that I can sleep more than four hours a night, weeks I don't have to feel guilty for going to the lab. They are cold, and empty, and precious, and sweet. Plums picked too soon, chilled and sugared.

I have stopped taking any but the barest of notes. I have stopped trying to divine patterns from results. I simply make alterations and run another iteration, and hope. I've thickened the neural scaffolding. I've thinned the neural scaffolding. I've altered the incubator's nutrients more times than I can count. I've spliced foreign genes into Alexia's DNA—my genes, others' genes, virus genes. Lately I've been splicing in genes of animals from around the lab. She is slightly different each time, I don't know what I'm growing, but I cannot stop until I have my daughter back. I am desperate and flailing and I will never, ever give up on Alexia. The sun will burn down to a cinder before I let my daughter stay dead.

In the hall two pairs of footsteps approach, clapping in unison on the bare floor, pass the door to the lab and continue on, receding in echoes. The night watch on patrol. I let my hand drop from the glass, leaving a smudge of oil. The facility breathes, and I breathe with it. I realize this isn't science anymore. This is madness.

### 3—The Americans

**M**aryya's eyes flared open and she jerked upright. The glowing hands of her bedside alarm clock showed approximately three o'clock. What had woken her?

From somewhere distant she could hear muffled popping noises—sharp staccato beats. They swelled, stopped, resumed—erratic. Then the bed shook, the floor shook,

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the whole room shook, with a bone-deep bass vibration. An explosion somewhere. She'd been woken by the previous one.

Marya flung her sheet aside, jumped to her feet. She swung her heavy lab coat over her shoulders, the one weighed down with a thick inner layer of quilted nylon and interwoven aluminum plates. She pocketed the Walther to the sounds of soldiers running down the hall beyond her door. They yelled out as they approached.

"Who?"

An answering yell from further down the hall, muffled by distance so she could just barely make out:

"Americans! South lab!"

There was a mass of swearing as the soldiers ran past and down the hall. Marya swore silently with them. She yanked open her door and turned toward the command center, the immediate first stop, considering her options as she strode.

The Americans had an ideological commitment to the alternative evolutionary theory proposed by Charles Darwin. The inherent cruelty of that theory offered the only moral justification for capitalism. Even the British had politely allowed Darwin's name to fall into disuse, and picked up the biological tools provided by Lamarck's masterpiece. The Americans refused. Without the excuses of Darwinism, their evil would have no shield.

Darwinism disallowed genetic reverse transcription. Darwin claimed that changes in an organism's body were purely physiological and could not be reflected in the organism's genes. A woman born with genes for mental feebleness could never overcome that heritage with study and work, she was stuck with those genes for life. More importantly—she could never ensure stronger genes for her offspring. She was cursed to only ever contribute genes for feeble-mindedness to any children she had.

That belief was what lay at the root of capitalism's rapacity. In the real world, the righteous are rewarded. Those who worked hard would reap exceptional children. Through sweat and effort man could raise himself up to ever greater heights.

In the Darwinist's vision, this was not the case. Children would inherit genes that were a permutation of what their parents had been born with, regardless of how much or how little their parents did in the interim.

That wasn't even the worst of it. It was entirely random if the genetic inheritance would be better or worse than that of the parents. And it was impossible to determine which offspring had inherited superior genes and which had inherited inferior genes in a laboratory. No codex yet existed that would identify some DNA sequences as desirable and others as defective. This led to the true horror of Darwinian Capitalism. The only strategy that could move a population forward was excess reproduction, followed by a culling of the inferior offspring. The new generation must by necessity fight over the inadequate resources left. They were pitted amongst each other to winnow out the most fit. The strongest of them—the smartest or brawnliest or fastest—would survive, seizing enough resources to live and to support their own children. Those unlucky enough to have been born with weaker genes would die before they could reproduce. Starvation. Disease. Violence. Wretched deaths. There was no refining of genes through effort. There was only the purging of the weak. A remorseless process, red in tooth and claw. Only through a harvest of slaughter could society be advanced.

They euphemized this as "selection."

The Lamarckian effects of implementing the Darwinian model were, of course, observable in the Americans' genetic makeup. The increased aggression of the parents was transmitted to their children. The ruthlessness of the Americans was legendary. They could not be moved to pity or remorse. American agents may not have the inbred skill and finesse of the British, but their feral drive more than compensated for it. The halls of Marya's facility would be awash with blood before this day was over.

As she stepped into the control center it was obvious she had not come to this conclusion alone. Grim-faced men and women acknowledged her with barely a nod, dread in their eyes. Ivan's lieutenant Sergei stood leaning over the closed-circuit monitors, punching buttons to switch between various cameras with one hand, holding a radio receiver in the other. His face glistened with a damp sheen. The facility map on the wall beside him was a field of flashing bulbs. Every floor held at least two rooms that had been hit, including . . .

Marya's heart stopped. No. The edges of her vision darkened, her focus tightened, until all she could see was a single outlined room on the wall. The tunneling of her vision brought the map inches from her face. The light by cloning lab 2 was blinking rapidly. Alexia's lab.

Marya spun on her heel and raced down the hall. Behind her someone called her name, the sound losing itself in the complex, ricocheting off the walls. All she heard was her footfalls, shoes slapping the ground. Her heartbeat, pounding in her ears.

The room was a disaster. Smashed glass, scorched walls, overturned desks. In the center of the room the large cloning tank sat wrecked, one side caved in by a blast. Thick vitreous fluids oozed down its side and pooled around its base. Marya rushed past it, not allowing herself to look at the half-grown thing still clutched within. It was little more than a partially fleshed skeleton at this stage. It couldn't survive outside the tank, couldn't even draw breath. She could start again in lab 3 tomorrow, if the backup cortical matrix was intact.

She dashed to a corner of the darkened room, the overhead lamps shattered. Twisted metal blocked her path—a crumpled gurney, a fallen rack of shelving. She scrabbled at them with bare hands, wrenching them aside. The wreckage banged down behind her and she was down on her knees amid the shattered glass, frantic, pulling at a small steel door. A door like that on a safe, a door which should not have goo seeping out from under it and yet it did, it did . . .

Her hands shook as she swung the safe open. Inside, a jungle of jagged glass and jaundiced slime, streaked with tiny rivulets of red. A mess of spongy pink matter in tatters—shredded, smashed, smeared. It seeped.

Marya slowly stood up, in a daze. The room spun, she steadied herself with a hand on a counter. Observed herself vomiting, clutching abdominal strain, loose liquid spilling from her lips. She wiped her mouth with the back of one hand and staggered back to the broken body in the wrecked clone tank. Maybe she could still . . .

No. The body had been pulped by the explosion. Her hands pawed at the corpse, the world blurred, and somewhere she could hear a high keening, a disbelieving shrieking that came in inhuman waves. It didn't sound like the sort of noise a human should be able to produce.

Unable to breathe, she staggered from the room. The floor floated beneath her, the walls lurched from side to side. It seemed like she should be doing something. There was something that was expected now, that honor demanded she must do. Alexia was gone, and she had been so close. But now there was nothing to be done. Except there was. Why wouldn't it come to her?

Marya's eyes focused and she realized she was back in the control center. A tech was looking at her apprehensively. The lieutenant was still leaning over the monitors, speaking into his radio. She couldn't hear what was he was saying. All that emitted from his mouth was a sort of low buzzing sound, in the rhythms of human speech. Another deep rumble shook the floor. The map-bulb by the diesel backup generators flared to life. It occurred to her there was something she could do. Marya took in a deep breath and walked to the reactor controls.

Calmly she switched every control rod to manual, then took hold of the large central dial and began turning it counter-clockwise. Unheard over the sounds of combat,

the control rods retracted. The temperature gauge began to rise, then stopped, as the system compensated by boosting the coolant flow. Marya moved to the wall of breakers and flipped every switch on the fourth floor. The pumps died and the temperature resumed its rise. Now the backup generators would have activated, completely beyond her control unless she could physically destroy them. Fortunately the Americans had done that for her, and sealed their own doom.

The nervous technician came over, eyes darting from her to the reactor temperature gauge, to the breakers, then back to her. She noticed he was the same man who'd scooped up Alexia during Uri Pushkin's audit, to cover for her. Back when there had been an Alexia to scoop up.

"Doctor Kovanich, what are you doing?" he asked.

"What does it look like? I'm taking the reactor critical."

The tech went completely white; she watched the blood draining from his face over mere seconds.

"But we'll all die!"

"Better for us to die than for the Americans to escape with this research. What we have here can alter the course of the next world war. It can't fall into their hands." And they killed Alexia. They would never see daylight again.

"We have not lost the facility! They will be repelled, we don't need to die!"

"If they take the control center, the meltdown can be halted. We have to act before they have it. Are you willing to risk the future of all of Russia? Of all free socialist people?"

"But it's too soon!" His eyes had taken on a wild gleam now, his voice a desperate strain. "Stop this now! You're killing us for nothing!"

"No."

The tech stared at her wide-eyed, then made a lunge past her, reaching for the breakers. She shoved his hand away, stepped to block his path. His other hand swung up, caught her above the eye with a blow that sent her into the wall. He bulled past her but she threw out a hand, ripping at his face, nails catching flesh. A choked roar escaped him and he slammed his shoulder into her body, pinning her, one hand flailing at her ribs. She tore at him, gripped one ear, her other hand fumbling at her coat, fighting into the pocket despite the thrashing.

And then the cold steel was in her grasp. She pressed it to his abdomen through the cloth as he hit her again, pain exploding across her side. Her hand clenched and the metal spasmed, spitting. The tiny detonation was muffled by their bodies. Mostly by his body. He jerked, as if shocked, but didn't let go. Marya loosened her finger and pulled the trigger again.

His body shuddered with the second shot and he pulled away, looking at her in wonder. A mix of disbelief and surprise. She yanked the gun from her pocket, rested the barrel against his sternum, and fired a third time.

Even as he fell Marya was turning from him, to the lieutenant by the monitors. His brow was furrowed in confusion but his hand was at his hip, pulling his own pistol from its holster. Marya's gun was already drawn, she pointed it at him and fired in one motion. Then again, and again. The first shot went wide but the second took him in the shoulder and the third took a chunk of his face with it. He went down in a twist, sending an arc of bright red blood over the floor and monitor panel. Marya took three quick steps to him and put one more bullet into his back.

She scanned the room, pistol ready. Only one person remained, a scientist by the name of Vera. She held her hands up above her head, palms out, and pleaded with her eyes. Marya paused. But everyone here was as good as dead anyway, and she didn't need further complications. She shot her as well. The slide locked open, and Marya dropped the empty gun.

Marya turned back to check on the reactor controls. The whole world jumped violently, the floor throwing her across the room. An ear-splitting boom shook her core. She crashed to the floor on her side, several cabinets of the computer coming down around her.

This was not right. It was too soon. And she was still alive. She jumped to her feet and rushed to the console.

The temperature had stopped rising, and she saw now that the pressure gauge was dropping rapidly. Something had ruptured violently. A steam explosion—it would have had to be massive to tear open the reactor containment. Which meant the fuel rods would be scattered now, too dispersed to chain into a nuclear reaction.

The radiation counter, however, was maxed out and obviously past its limits. Marya smiled. The graphite moderator was exposed and burning, and spewing radioactive particulates into the air. No one here would live beyond the next few days. Even if the Americans escaped, they would never live to deliver Marya's stolen work. This was better than a quick, explosive death. This was the death they deserved—days of agony as their insides turned to jelly and ran from their bodies. Blistering, skin-flaying burns. Internal swelling and hemorrhaging. Yes. This was justice.

Marya crouched down and pried the lieutenant's pistol from his grip. It was heavier than the Walther, and held two extra rounds. She would only need the one. There was no reason for her to die the same screaming death as the Americans. She sat down, barely registering the sound of gunfire erupting nearby, maybe on the next floor. It no longer mattered.

Perhaps her data would survive for the recovery crews to find. Certainly her radiophage would thrive in the irradiated environment. Others could continue where she left off. She may not have a daughter to continue her line, or loved ones to mourn her passing. But the legacy of her work would alter the nature of humanity, and shape the face of the world for centuries. Not many people could say that. It would be selfish to ask for more.

She put the gun in her mouth and closed her eyes.

### Reprise

I lay a damp washcloth over my daughter's forehead, hoping to make her last hours more comfortable. I know from experience her fever will not break before she dies. She lies on the bed, shivering under her blanket, face glistening with sweat. Her eyes flutter but she no longer murmurs words, she doesn't have the energy. Her lips part and twitch as she tries to say something into the darkness. I sit beside her on the bed and take her hand in mine. It clenches feebly.

"It's okay. Don't try to talk. Momma's here again."

Her head lolls to one side. I readjust the washcloth. We exist, together, for a time uncounted.

After years or seconds or something in between her hand relaxes and her shivers subside. Her breathing is ragged but regular, and she sleeps. I watch her for a long moment before I take the cloth from her head and stand up. I will have to go back through the main bedroom to get to our private bathroom—one of only four in the complex—and rewet the washcloth. Natasha will be there. I consider waiting until she goes to sleep. But that would be something *she* would do. I am stronger. I take one last look at Alexia, then look away and harden my eyes.

When I step from Alexia's bedroom into our room Natasha is waiting for me. She sits at the tiny folding table we eat our dinners on and looks up at me with baleful

eyes. They are crystal blue, a stolen piece of the open sky which I haven't seen in months. Her gold hair spills down her shoulders, beautiful even in disarray. I cannot look at her and not see Alexia. If I'm honest, I still love that about her. She stands up in that manner which I know means this will not be a peaceful night.

"A resupply flight is arriving tomorrow," she says without preamble. "I'm leaving on it when it returns."

The announcement hits me like a punch to the gut. I want to double over and retch. Instead I stand my ground and gaze at her silently. I wasn't expecting this. She can't go. Not so soon. Not when we were making progress.

"You should come with me," she continues. "Leave this place in Boris's hands for a season. Or two."

"No." It's all I can get out at first, all I have breath for, but a growing pressure is building in my gut, hot and roiling. "I can't leave Alexia. They'd stop the project."

"Alexia is gone." Her voice wavers. "Alexia died months ago. You can't keep doing this. You can't keep killing her over and over again."

The pressure condenses into rage and it starts to boil up my throat. I swallow it down and tighten my hands into fists.

"Alexia is in the next room and she's getting better every month. We will kill this cancer and she will live again."

"Marya, you have to stop." Her voice breaks and she's blinking back tears now. "I barely recognize what you've become. I barely recognize what *I've* become. This cycle of birth and death, this constant unending murder of our child, it is destroying you. It is destroying me."

"I will never stop. Not until our child is returned to us. You can go." I jab a finger toward her, accusing. "If that's how weak you are, how little your love means, you can take your bullshit love and leave. I still hurt, and I still care."

Natasha's tears well over and I feel a stabbing pain in my chest. It's overcome by a sense of disgust. She doesn't get to trump my emotions with her tears. The fact that she's crying pales in comparison to Alexia's death.

"Fine," she croaks, wiping at her face. "I'm going. But I won't allow you to do this to Alexia anymore. It's m-monstrous, and I'm taking her. All of her. The genetic s-samples, the neural scaffolding—all of it."

My eyes narrow to slits and I can barely see around the encroaching rage.

"Like hell you are!" I spit. "Get the fuck out of here and don't ever come back!"

"I m-mean it!" she says, stepping forward, hands clenched to her chest. There's a fire deep in her eyes, shining past the tears. "I won't allow you to keep doing this to her! Killing her! She's *my* daughter!"

My hand flies out of its own accord, slaps her across the face hard enough her whole body snaps to the left under the blow. I wouldn't have stopped it anyway, it feels right. The sound echoes in the room like a gunshot. I step forward, both arms shaking with what must be rage. I can feel my face twist into a snarl.

"*Fuck you!*" I yell. "She's not *your* daughter! You think because you gave birth to her, like some talking brood sow, that gives you special license over her? I've been her god-damn mother for eight goddamn years, I have just as much claim to her as you! I love her, she is my life, she is my fucking soul, and you will never take her from me!"

I lean over Natasha, who is still bent to the left with a hand up to her cheek. It flares bright red where I struck her. There is fear in her eyes now, and something inside me hurts to see that from her, from the woman I've loved all my life, but not enough to stem the churning fury that's risen to my chest.

"I won't let you do this," she forces out in a choked whisper. "I'll tell them what you're doing. It's unethical. It's immoral. It's unapproved and unfunded. They will come down on you like a hammer."

The washcloth lies forgotten on the floor. My heart thunders in my ears. I step forward and Natasha shrinks from me. I'm not any larger than her, but the storm howling inside drives me on. I continue forward until she's pressed back against the wall, face turned away, quivering and sniveling. I raise my hand and she flinches as I place one finger on her cheek. I trace a line of tears down her face, then cup her chin and lean in. I press my nose into her hair, putting my mouth right by her ear.

"If you ever say or do anything to endanger Alexia, I will kill you. I don't care where you are or what it takes, I will hunt you down and murder you. They will find your bloody carcass stripped of all its skin and rotting in a dumpster." I take a breath. That may not be enough. She's sobbing quietly now. "And then I will start on your family. First your cousin Petrov, and his blushing bride. Neither will live to see the end of the year. Then your mother, and your father. If they still haven't caught me by then, I will hunt down both your nieces and drown them in a bathtub. I will continue to murder everyone you cared for until the day they finally catch me, and when they march me to the gallows I will go with a smile on my face, knowing that every last death is on your conscience and not mine." I pause a moment. "Is that what you want?"

She whimpers incoherently and I hate her for forcing me to become this thing. I clench my hand, digging my fingers into the skin of her jaw. "Answer me," I hiss.

I feel her tugging her head, and slacken my grip. She shakes her head minutely.

"Then you will never breathe a word of this to anyone, so long as you live."

I let go of her and step back. She slides down to the floor, weeping. I watch her descend but she never raises her head to look at me, never raises her eyes from the ground. Her hair falls over her face like a veil, hiding her from me. I turn and walk back into Alexia's room. I close the door behind me, softly.

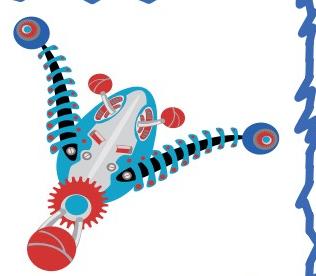
I stand there for a long time, breathing, trying to calm myself. As the adrenaline begins to wash out of my system my body starts to tremble. My hands shake violently, and I cross my arms to steady them. I can feel hot tears welling up and I squeeze my eyes shut tight. I may vomit. I won't go back into the main room. I'll vomit right here if I have to.

Time passes, and I come back to myself. In the other room I can hear Natasha crying and throwing clothes into a bag. This isn't the first time we've had a shouting fight, and no one even bothers to check on us anymore. Maybe this is for the best.

I cross to Alexia's bed and notice she's stopped shivering. She lies there serenely. I know what this means, but I still reach down to touch her. Her flesh is growing cool, but I force myself to check her pulse regardless.

I sit down on the floor, my back to the child's bed, and bend my head over my drawn-up knees. I sit the night by my daughter's body, waiting for her mother to leave. Tomorrow I will start again. O

nanobots  
having rebuilt my heart  
I hold her hand  
to my naked chest  
so she can feel her name  
—Joshua Gage



**Leah Cypess admits to a fondness for the East Coast. She wrote the following story in Boston, but by the time you read it, she will be living near Washington, DC. Previously, she lived in New York City. Leah is the author of numerous short stories and several fantasy novels. Her most recent book, *Death Sworn*, is about a reluctant tutor of assassins-in-training, and will be followed by a sequel—*Death Marked*, which will be published by Greenwillow Books, an imprint of HarperCollins—in March 2015. In the author's latest tale, a confused young woman learns as much about herself as she does about . . .**

# FORGIVENESS

**Leah Cypess**

The day Michael came back to school, I was still wearing long sleeves. Not because of the bruises. That's what everyone thought, but the truth was, the bruises had faded weeks before. I didn't know why I was wearing them myself, until Michael slunk through the front doors, and everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to stare at him.

Once, he would have laughed and strode through them, meeting their eyes and daring them to say something. Instead, he focused on the yellow-speckled white tiles as he walked down the hallway.

My heart lodged in my throat. He had always been so fierce, so vital, with so much life in him that it spilled out around the edges and infected everyone close to him. Now his steps were slow and heavy, and when Nandini stepped ostentatiously away from him, he flinched.

*I did that to him.*

I took a deep breath, stepped out of the classroom where I had been hiding, and walked across the tiles to meet him.

Aim 1 accomplished: No one was looking at him anymore. Everyone was looking at me.

Everyone but Michael.

He saw me, but wouldn't look me in the face. His blue eyes flicked to my sleeves, and I waited for him to ask if the bruises were still there.

*That* was why I had been wearing long sleeves. Waiting for this moment.

His eyes finally met mine, his expression a mute plea, and my heart thudded dully. Somehow, just by walking over, I had hurt him. Again.

*Walk away.* How many times had Nandini urged me to do just that?

Only this time, I did.

As soon as I slammed the stall door shut, I heard someone else walk into the girls' bathroom. No question who it was.

"Go away," I said. I hadn't started crying yet, but my voice was quivering.  
 "It's Nandini."

Like it could be anyone else. Nandini had been playing concerned-best-friend to the hilt the past month. And though she 80 percent meant it, I was still really, really sick of hearing it from her.

"Go away," I said again, with a viciousness Nandini claimed I learned from Michael. She doesn't know me as well as she thinks.

A pause, and then the bathroom door closed again.

I wondered if Michael blamed me. Probably. Ms. Thompson said he could still feel anger, he just couldn't act on it. But she didn't know Michael as well as she thought. Acting on his feelings was the way he felt them.

Nobody knew Michael, not really. Ever since he'd agreed to get a chip—and people only agreed to chips to avoid jail time—everyone talked about him like he was a monster. Like his mistakes were all he was. Like *they* had no flaws, nothing ugly deep inside them.

The way they looked at him. As if he was a zoo exhibit. A monster in a cage. The way his head stayed down, as if he had been forced to agree with them.

*Oh, Michael. I blame myself too.*

Of course, I had to have an extra therapy session that afternoon, to help me deal with him being back. Ms. Thompson, leaning over her desk with her blond hair swinging around her chin, wanted to know how it made me *feel*.

"It made me feel happy," I said. I had been behaving for weeks now, playing my part. But just being in the same building as Michael made me defiant. The way he once would have been. "I missed him."

Result: an extra therapy session the next week. Clearly, that "Feelings Can't be Wrong" sign on the office wall was a blatant lie.

I spent the next week scheming to talk to Michael alone. Going to his house was, of course, out of the question—his parents hated me, and I didn't blame them. School was equally problematic. Nandini stuck to me like lichen, warding off everyone else with protective looks, steering me clear of the more obnoxious girls. As if I couldn't handle their questions.

More likely, she was afraid of what I would answer.

In the end, Michael found me. The way he always did. I was on my way to extracred bio when he stepped into the hall in front of me, gave me the crooked grin I had missed so much, and disappeared into an empty classroom.

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. I slammed the door behind me and flung myself into his arms. At that moment, it didn't even occur to me that he might push me away.

He didn't push me away.

Maybe twenty minutes later, I finally untangled myself from his arms. My lips were puffy, my skin was on fire, and I was so happy. I hadn't realized how unhappy I was.

"I love you," Michael said. He was breathing hard, almost desperately, his dark hair a mass of damp tangles. "Anna. I missed you so much. The treatment was awful, but not being able to see you was the worst part of it."

I burst into tears.

"Don't." He grabbed my hand and drew me close. "Don't cry. It will be all right. We're together again."

And we were. Just like that.

I should have known it was inevitable.

Not that it would be easy. My parents would never accept my decision. Just thinking about how they would react made me want to crawl into a hole and hide. They couldn't know. No one could know.

"How are we going to manage that?" I said. "We go to the same *school*."

"We'll manage," Michael said, with the easy confidence I remembered. He had never, ever been afraid of a challenge.

And when I was with him, neither was I.

I was hurrying out of the cafeteria—if I ate quickly, I could steal ten minutes with Michael before lunch ended—when someone stepped in front of me. I almost collided with a silver sports jersey.

"Oh, sorry—" I began.

"No, my fault," Darryl said quickly. "I, um. I wanted to ask you something."

I blinked up at him. In retrospect, it was stupid that I had no idea what was coming. Darryl was a jock, not one of my and Michael's usual crowd, but I had been in a study group with him when Michael was arrested. He had been concerned and sympathetic, just like everyone, and I hadn't really noticed his existence, just like with everyone.

"The spring dance," Darryl said, and ran a hand over his short curly hair. It was unusual to see a guy that good-looking get nervous. If his skin were lighter, he definitely would have been blushing. "Would you—do you think you would want to come with me?"

I froze.

That night, I thought of a dozen good reasons for saying no. *It's too soon. I need to be on my own. I'm going with Nandini, a girls-only sort of pact.* Anything.

Instead, I said the worst possible thing. I said, "I can't do that to Michael."

Darryl's jaw tensed, but his voice went gentle. "Anna. You don't have to be afraid of him anymore."

I wanted to slap him across the face and fill that patronizing mouth with blood. For a moment, I understood exactly how Michael used to feel.

Still feels, I guess. Though he can't slap anyone, not anymore.

As if the only thing between me and Michael was fear. As if Michael's temper erased his brilliance, and his courage, and his sly sense of humor, and his love for me.

Back when he *could* hurt me, it was all true. His temper, his need for control, overshadowed everything else. For a long time, his fists mattered more than anything. I proved that when I reported him. It was the hardest thing I ever did, but I did it, because I knew I couldn't be with someone who was hurting me.

But he couldn't hurt me anymore, and that changed everything. Why did nobody get that?

"It doesn't matter how angry he gets," Darryl said. "The chip removes his ability to engage in violent behavior. He can't hit you."

"Thank you, Darryl. I know how it works." I crossed my arms over my chest. "And weren't you on the anti-chip side of the debate team? I remember your speech. Human freedom, moral responsibility, blah blah blah. What happened to all that?"

"What happened," Darryl said tightly, "was that I saw your bruises."

Like it was my fault he had to let go of his holier-than-thou beliefs.

I stepped back, and his eyes widened. He said, "You don't have to be afraid of *me*. Even without a chip, *I'd* never hurt you."

He looked over my shoulder when he said *I*. I turned around. Michael was leaning against the wall, watching us.

I knew I didn't have to be afraid, but I couldn't help it. I was.

I waited for the inevitable consequences. But nothing happened.

Nothing happened for five days. Michael didn't come over to me, didn't talk to me, didn't meet me at any of the places we had been meeting. We weren't in the same classes anymore—his had all been switched—so I didn't get to see him at all.

Was that what he was going to do now, when he was mad? Just *ignore* me?

It was almost worse than the alternative. I didn't know when the silent treatment was going to end. I didn't know if it was going to end.

And that scared me worse than waiting for the blow-up used to. At least then, I knew that when it was over, everything would go back to normal.

On the sixth day, I did something I never would have dared do before. I went to Michael and forced the confrontation myself. Told him he was being an idiot, Darryl was only asking, I hadn't said yes. I loved him and would never cheat on him and he had to trust me.

He was furious, his eyes sparkling, but he had to listen to me. There was nothing else he could do.

We had a month together—a blissful, joyous month—before my parents found out. That went about as well as could be expected.

"I'm seventeen," I shouted, after they had been going at me for an hour. "I'm old enough to know my own feelings and make my own choices. I love him. I need you to trust me."

"*Trust* you?" My dad was doing all the talking by now, since my mother was sobbing hysterically. "Do you understand how hard last year was for us? Forget us—for *you*. We don't even know everything he did to you. How can you possibly—"

"You're being irrational." I was doing my best not to cry, but I was fighting a losing battle. "Michael won't hurt me ever again. He *can't*. If you look at it logically, I'm safer with him than with anyone else in the world."

"It's not that simple! He's a monster—"

"He is *not*! He had one flaw, and *it is fixed*. So what's your problem?"

"He's not fixed," my father said. "He's controlled. Muzzled."

That did it. I whirled on my heel.

"I just don't understand," my mother gasped, through her tears. "I don't understand, Anna."

"I know you don't," I snapped. "But I'm the one who was hurt, and I forgive him. Why can't you?"

To be fair: I had to meet Darryl, to get the assignments I missed during the new extra-extra therapy sessions requested by my parents.

To be honest: I didn't have to laugh quite so hard at his imitation of Mr. Purcell, and I definitely didn't have to brush his arm with my hand when I said thank you.

"You're testing," Ms. Thompson said, when I brought it up. "Making sure you're really safe with Michael, even when you do things that used to lead to his . . . outbursts."

By now, the fact that I was back with Michael was public news. But Ms. Thompson, unlike my so-called friends, still had to talk to me.

She didn't know me that well, though, which was why she was giving me the benefit of the doubt. I knew better. I wasn't testing. I was goading.

But I didn't know *why*. I loved Michael, I didn't want to upset him . . . or did I? Maybe I wanted a little bit of revenge. Maybe anyone would, in my position.

That answer made sense, just like Ms. Thompson's. But it didn't feel any more true.

Michael was practically crying when he confronted me. He said it proved what he knew all along, that I was a stupid slut who couldn't be faithful unless I was afraid.

February 2015

His fist clenched and his arm bulged, and I almost backed away, but he was so clearly . . . helpless. He couldn't touch me.

I was safe.

I stood my ground, and he was the one who left, storming away with his fists clenched at his sides.

He gave me the silent treatment for a week this time, but in the end he couldn't resist me. He never could. And it wasn't like anyone else would talk to him.

Or me. Nandini's interactions with me had been reduced to sending me article links (the last one: "Chips: How Safe Are They? Are There Workarounds—and Are Criminals Figuring Them Out?"). Darryl and I still hung out, because we were in almost all the same classes, and he was surprisingly smart for a jock.

A part of me felt guilty for hanging out with him—guilty with a lining of fear. But that was just old habits, and I had to overcome them. Things were different now. I could be with Michael and still have a life. I *should* be able to have another friend, even a cute guy friend, without feeling like everything would come crashing down on me.

I wasn't doing anything wrong. Not being with Michael, not hanging out with Darryl. This was what a normal life felt like.

This was the way things were supposed to be.

Then, during one of our fights (about Darryl, they were always about Darryl), Michael grabbed my wrist.

Just for a second, and then he winced and let go. But I didn't think he could have done that a few weeks ago.

Did chips weaken? Could they weaken if someone was fighting them *all the time*? They're not supposed to—they're supposed to last forever—but even though I never read Nandini's articles, even though they were all by crackpots, they had planted a seed of doubt.

And I hadn't deleted them.

I read them until three in the morning, and read the comments, too, which of course was a terrible mistake. A lot of people were convinced the chips could be fought. That the human brain could find ways to work around them, to gradually weaken them by sheer persistence. There was no proof. But there *were* a lot of anecdotes from random strangers on the internet. People, I reminded myself, who I didn't know and had no reason to trust.

By the time I clicked the computer shut, I was scared again, and I didn't like it. I had forgotten how it felt.

The next week, Michael grabbed my wrist and squeezed. Long and hard enough to hurt.

I had also forgotten how it felt to be hurt. There was so much *pain*. That was obvious—should have been—but everyone had talked to me so much about the other parts of it: the helplessness, the guilt, the loneliness. I had almost started to think the pain was unimportant.

It wasn't.

Fear spiked through me, and memory came flooding back: of being hurt, and hurt, and hurt. I didn't want that. I had never wanted it. What I had wanted, always, was Michael. A Michael who didn't hurt me.

And now I had that. So why was I doing this? Why was I spending time with Darryl, pushing Michael harder and harder?

I said, in a low whisper, "I won't talk to him again. I promise."

Michael let go of my arm and leaned in to kiss me as if nothing had happened.

After he left, I sat for a long time holding my phone. I could call my parents—or Ms. Thompson, or the police—and tell them. The chip had been part of Michael’s plea bargain. It wasn’t an agreement he could back out of. If I told, he would be taken back to the clinic, and the doctors would find out what was wrong. They would implant a new chip, a stronger one, and monitor him more closely afterward. I would be safe with him again.

Why wasn’t I dialing? Was there a part of me that *wanted* to be hurt?  
Was it my fault, the way I used to think it was?

Michael was really sweet the next day. Like he used to be. During lunch, we lay together on the lawn, and talked so long we both forgot to eat. He told me he wasn’t making any college choices until I decided where I was going. My heart turned over and flooded me with hope.

It wasn’t like he had left bruises on my wrist. It wasn’t like he even grabbed that hard. I was overreacting.

“I love you,” he whispered. “I tried to stop loving you, when I was in treatment, and especially after the operation. I tried so hard. Then I saw you, that first day back, and in one second it was all over.”

I floated through the weekend in a haze of happiness.

Darryl cornered me after study hall on Thursday. I tried to squeeze past him, and he grabbed my wrist, exactly where Michael had. I yelled, and he let go instantly.

“What’s going on?” he said.

“Nothing,” I lied. “I’m not trying to avoid you. Michael and I are spending a lot of time together, that’s all. Deciding on colleges.”

He stared down at me, chest heaving, and I waited for his accusation. I hadn’t been fair to him, and I knew it. I wished I had done things differently. But in the end, he was just a random guy, and he’d find someone else to flirt with. Michael was the one who mattered.

“*Why?*” Darryl said. “*Why are you with him? I don’t get it.*”

“I love him,” I said. “I never stopped loving him.”

Darryl’s face tightened. He shook his head, and then, finally, turned and walked away.

Not quite fast enough. I caught Michael’s steel-blue eyes across the room, recognized the familiar set of his mouth, the fury building in him.

Ms. Thompson’s office was down the hall. Nandini’s number was the first speed-dial on my phone. My parents’ was the second. I could have called any of them.

I didn’t, even when he started toward me.

I didn’t know why until I saw him coming up my front steps, a bouquet of flowers in his hand. Blue and lavender—my favorite colors—so large the petals almost obscured his face. And then I understood.

My upper arm throbbed beneath my long sleeve, and my stomach felt tight and bruised. It hadn’t been his worst rage, not by a long shot. He had been sufficiently in control to avoid my face. My parents hadn’t noticed the careful way I was moving. Nobody knew anything. Nobody would.

I picked up the phone and dialed.

He was on his tenth knock by the time I got to the door. After only a moment’s hesitation, I opened it. I knew his pattern. There was nothing to be afraid of, not right now.

I took the flowers without speaking. His face was drawn, stark hollows beneath his eyes. He looked at me, then away.

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"Anna," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I don't—I can't—I love you so much, and I hate that I—I'm just so, so sorry."

"I know," I said.

He looked up, a faint, fearful hope dawning on his face. "Can you forgive me?"

"Yes," I said.

He smiled at me, radiant, the smile of pure joy that had drawn me to him the first time I saw him. It filled my heart, to know I had caused that joy in him. It eased the fading pain in my arm and back.

But when he stepped forward, I stepped back.

"Anna?" he said, hesitant.

And then he heard the sirens.

He could have run, but he didn't. He stood there, the brightness draining out of his face, staring at me.

"Why?" he whispered.

Anger came to my aid, at last. "Are you joking?" I yanked up my sleeve. The bruise was purple-yellow, still darkening.

He flinched. "But then—why not yesterday? Why now, when I came to *apologize*?"

As if his apology should have made everything better.

But I had also thought it would. It was what I had wanted, what I had never gotten, while he was chipped. He hadn't been able to hurt me anymore, but he also hadn't been sorry that he had.

This was why I flirted with Darryl. This was why I hadn't told. It wasn't that I wanted to be hurt.

I wanted him to be *sorry*.

I had thought that once he was, we could be together again. I took another step back, hoping I wouldn't cry.

A new chip, hopefully, would fix him. But it wouldn't fix *us*.

"You don't have to do this," Michael said.

"I do," I said. "I have to do exactly this."

He stared at me blankly. Behind him, a police car pulled onto the curb, red and blue lights flashing.

I went inside, through the kitchen and into the family room. I put the flowers carefully into a crystal vase and filled it halfway with water, and by the time I was done, I had my tears under control. I yanked my sleeve down over my arm and went outside to give my statement. ○

# Perhaps

Perhaps she loved him first,  
followed him out of habit,  
felt the zero seep from his pores,  
his breath a tundra, his disdain  
the ice of a parvenu.

Perhaps she left that cold love  
for a better, returned  
to the robber girl  
who'd shown her reindeer  
and bannocks baked on coals,  
who gave her hot cider  
pierced by a poker,  
who kissed her slowly  
while the heat rose  
between their breasts.

Perhaps this is the story  
I wanted to read, the one  
Andersen was afraid to tell,  
while the young man he loved  
without telling or hope,  
grew old, one letter,  
one small letter away  
from cold.

—Jane Yolen

# ON THE NIGHT OF THE ROBO-BULLS AND ZOMBIE DANCERS

Nick Wolven

**Nick Wolven's fiction has appeared most recently in *Panhandler* and *Fabula Argentea*. In his latest story, Nick has some fun speculating about the culture of finance and the limits of intelligence (human or otherwise), as well as unintended consequences, which are the well known bane of every futurist.**

*"Let the night teach us what we are, and the day what we should be."*

—Thomas Tyron

## 1: Wolves in the Bullpen

**W**hen Gabriel showed up for his nightshift, the other traders were already at their desks. They hunkered low over takeout sandwiches, meatball subs crushed in tinfoil, bleeding sauce. They looked like the kinds of beasts who have hackles to raise. They looked like wolves.

The sun was setting over downtown Manhattan.

Popovski came sauntering down the rows of desks. Popovski was the head of the fund, but Popovski never looked wolfish. Popovski looked chickenish, mostly because of how he held his elbows: up and out, like saucy little wings.

"We-ell!" called Popovski with his familiar lilt. "Ga-briel! Last one back in the office. You know what that means. I have a special mission for you."

Trader heads popped from the cubicles. There were a lot of cubicles, and even more traders. Kappalytics was a big fund with a small office. Popovski insisted on renting prime real estate. He said he liked his view of the New York skyline. He said he liked to see the city switch on and off.

Gabriel followed Popovski to one of the high windows. Just now, the city was switching on, going electric as the sun left town. Their two reflected faces faintly lightened the darkening sky.

"I hate the nightshift," Gabriel said. "And I especially hate special missions on the nightshift."

Popovski squeezed his shoulder. Gabriel had worked hard all day, unwinding the fund's big Serbian screwup. But this didn't count, or anyway, didn't count extra. At Kappalytics, there were no bonus points for work well done. Gabriel knew the rules.

"You know the rules," said Popovski. "Last one back from dinner gets the dirty work. If you don't like it, eat at your desk."

Gabriel had been eating at his desk for ten years now. He'd gone out to dinner tonight only because Marisol insisted. "Seven dayshifts a week, and seven nightshifts," his wife had said. "I don't know how much longer I can take this. I know the stakes. I know the economics. But can't we ever just take an evening off?"

Gabriel put a hand in his pocket and fingered his wake-up pill. It felt at once hard and delicate, a tiny egg ready to hatch.

"So what's the dirty work tonight?"

"Oh, it's that damn AI." Popovski led Gabriel to the terminal in the corner. "It's been playing for weeks in the mark-to-Markov exchanges. Now it's gone completely bozo. Look at this behavior!"

The terminal displayed a multicolored probability tree, rainbow branches in a 3D display. Branches grew and vanished as Gabriel watched, pruned by a cybernetic hand.

"Penrose is predicting something big," said Popovski. "He's going long-term. Don't ask me to explain it. Look at that time series! This is *posi-tute-ly* longitudinal. We're talking years. We're talking global. We're talking complexity beyond human understanding."

"So this chain of events." Gabriel traced the trunk of the tree. "Penrose is sure these things'll happen?"

"He better be," Popovski said. "I already bet the farm."

Penrose, the AI, was located underground in a vault in Thailand. Kappalytics only contracted for its services. Like all AI quants, Penrose surpassed human understanding. It gravitated toward crazily complex models, long-chain probabilities, million-factor sims. Extrapolations of unfathomable detail. Gabriel didn't understand it. No humans did.

If all trading was an attempt to predict the future, AIs were fortunetellers of insane sophistication. They spat out countless recommendations: buy this, sell that. But they couldn't express themselves in human terms. They were like child prodigies, Gabriel imagined, hypersmart, woefully inarticulate. No one really knew what their prognostications meant.

That never stopped Popovski. He bet on every tip the AIs handed out. Kappalytics was one of the heaviest robo-quant investors on the street.

"So you have no idea what this prediction means," Gabriel said, "but you bet on it anyway?"

"What can I do?" Popovski's chicken-arms flapped. "Penrose is ten million times as smart as me. But look at these numbers. We take a bath on this, we'll drown. The whole city will drown. The proverbial seas will proverbially rise." He kicked the terminal. "I called in our math kids. They're no good. Stanford PhD my ass. I called my snitch at Emporiki. He says they're seeing the same thing. All across town, the bot-quants are going batty. And everyone's signing up for the ride. It's a worldwide stampede. It's like some panicky Pascal's Wager."

"Meaning?" Gabriel said.

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"Meaning this time is different, Gabe. Meaning if this bubble pops, you and I and every other asset-wrangler on this planet are going to fall to earth with a wet and splattery sound. Meaning the proverbial end of days just became a matter of high probability."

Gabriel looked out the office windows. Manhattan's high buildings had snuffed the sun. Gabriel could never get used to modern investing, this biz where people placed bets without knowing what they were betting on. But that was high finance in a time of AI-modeling. No one saw the real-life forest for the probability trees.

"Maybe we should let this ride," Gabriel said. "It being nightshift and all."

"I hear you," Popovski said. "I want to take this cool and slow. I'm not making sudden moves. That's where you come in, Gabe. I want you to do something special for me. I want you to go on a pilgrimage."

"A pilgrimage? To where?"

Popovski's head swiveled, intimating long marches, Siberian treks, the illimitable unknown.

"Uptown," he said. "I want you to meet with Ribbeck."

"Ribbeck!" Gabriel's eyes felt like they were spinning. "But he never leaves the house."

"Exactly." Popovski's index finger pinned the second button of Gabriel's shirt. "That's why you need to go there and see him. If any human knows what's going on with the AI markets, it's Ribbeck. He predicted the great sweetened beverages short of '27. He flew with the last Russian capital flight, before the algo-traders had even spread their wings. He has a second sight, a third sight, an n-to-the-n sight. He peers into the market and he reads its dreams."

"But how will I get to him?" Gabriel said.

Popovski's lips made a rubbery sound. "That's your problem. I just rack the chips. RemoteID puts Ribbeck in his house on Seventy-third street. I want you working this old-school, Gabe. I want you getting face time with the man."

"But how will I convince him to let me in?"

"Oh," and Popovski's eyebrows got sly, "I don't think you'll have any trouble with that."

Gabriel leaned against the windows. He suddenly wanted nothing more than to lay his head on the low-pile carpet and sleep. How blessed, how undeservedly luxurious, to curl up like a baby, shut his eyes, and absent himself for seven hours from this world. He took his wake-up pill out of his pocket, rolling it in the crinkly wrapper between his finger and thumb. A snippet of language wriggled into his mind. *Methought I heard a voice cry "Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep" . . .*

"Let me get this straight—"

A bong sounded from someone's computer, throbbing like a grandfather clock. A trader shouted, "Eight o'clock! Nightshift, boys!"

Casters squeaked. Pneumatics creaked. Suddenly all the traders were in their chairs. The bullpen had become a wolf-pen, and the wolves were howling.

"A-roo! Nightshift! A-roo! A-roo!"

"A-roo!" sang Popovski. "Cock-a-doodle-do!" He jabbed an elbow into Gabriel's ribs. "Good luck out there, soldier. Those can be some mean streets."

## 2: Lunies and Goons

**G**abriel Boateng hadn't wanted to be a trader. In the spic-and-span concrete blocks of Ghana's all-new national university, he'd studied first atonal music, then sociometrics.

He thought of numbers as symbols that meant real things: meant how sound sounded, how people lived. This metonymic mathematical bias, along with deep monetary needs, had finally inclined him to a high-finance life. In the torrential liquidity of a round-the-clock global exchange, numbers had awesome, near deified meaning. Numbers meant the big thinks. They meant life and death.

Alone in the hall outside the office, Gabriel leaned against the door. He was second-generation American, but the first generation of the wake-up-pill world. Had the African imperialists of his ancestry, he wondered, ever felt so gosh-darn tired? Those warlike Ashanti of the golden coast had marshaled vast militaries, they had conquered and enslaved, they had vied and colluded with British colonialists. But had they ever sweated through eight consecutive days and nights of marathon Victoria-Falls-volume trading with the cutthroat bondmongers of modern-day Japan? Had they ever stayed awake for one hundred and seventeen nail-devouring hours in a multi-round firesale of decroded high-impact derivatives?

Had they ever been dispatched at the start of nightshift to traverse darkling Manhattan on a mission to ply modern banking's most phone-shy guru for clues to a Markov-market meltdown?

Ribbeck. What could he have to say about this?

More to the point: how could Gabriel get to him?

Gabriel called Marisol.

"Babe, what's up?" Marisol's dark face, pretty but prematurely weary, loomed in Gabriel's phonescreen. Racked terminals were her backdrop, the cluttered equipment of the dispatcher's station. "You know I can't talk." She adjusted her headset. "Nightshift just began."

"I know," Gabriel said. "That's what this is about. I need an escort, Mari. To go uptown."

"Uptown? On the nightshift? Gabe, you crazy?"

"Some mystery mojo hit the AI modelers. Popovski wants me to try and meet with Ribbeck."

"Ribbeck!" Marisol's eyes widened. "Good luck getting in touch with *him*. Doesn't he live in a coffin or something?"

"More like a bomb shelter," Gabriel said. "You have any spare cops?"

Marisol whistled. "I don't know, babe. The hard right's back in city office, cracking down on police details. Stop the cop shop, no hired guns, all that crap. I can send a contracted driver."

"A merc-car? To take me through the Village? You're kidding."

"Hey, hey." Marisol bobbed her head side-to-side. "Some of these mercs are on the level."

"They're all cultists. They're vigilantes. And they drive like Frenchmen."

"Gabe?" Marisol suddenly looked worried. "Are you sure you want to do this? Head uptown? On the nightshift? 'Cause you can tell that plutocrat Popovski if anything happens to my Gaby-Baby, I'm showing up at that slave pen you call an office with a police-issue pain ray."

A credible threat. Even police dispatchers these days got serious combat training.

"I can't help it, Mari. It's do the job or screw the job. It's the rat race, round-the-clock."

"Well, I've got no cops for you, but there's no way I'm sending you out there alone. I see a merc-car in your area. I'm sending him over."

Gabriel groaned.

"The cops don't like the Village either," Marisol said. "Roll with this contract man, hon. I'll sniff around and see what else I can rustle up. Much love."

"Marisol—"

She'd hung up.

Gabriel took his wake-up pill in the elevator. *Sleep no more . . . Macbeth does murder sleep . . .* Murder, yes, that was the word. Taking these damn pills always made him feel like something mild and gentle was being kicked to death inside him. They should put that slogan on the packaging.

He closed his eyes. The effects of the pill, phasing in, felt deeply feverish, a tissue-deep squeezing, a hard thud in back of his eyes.

The lobby was full of security guards. Every company in the building had its own force, liveried in distinctive blue. Cobalt, cornflower, Persian, navy. They gathered in groups behind aramid fiber barricades, German armaments oiled and agleam. Squad captains bawled over the helmeted heads.

"All right, boys! Nightshift! Check your bogarts, bugbears, and bogeymen at the door! Holster those projectile weapons; we're electric-only till dawn! Pause before you fire and repent after you kill! It's a half moon, a mad world, a hell of a town!"

No kidding. By three A.M., Gabriel knew, they'd mostly be shooting each other.

A bright orange car was parked by the building. Gabriel studied it through the glass doors. Sometimes scurrilous entities posed as hired escorts. You got in a merc-car and found yourself on a five-borough joyride, drag racing motorcycle gangs for hooker money on four landmasses. This car looked at least semi-legit. Gabriel jogged down the basalt steps.

"Uptoooown!" sang the driver, pushing open the passenger door. A beefy man with a British smile, he wore a yellow escort vest trimmed with reflectors that twinkled in the dwindling day. "Traveling during the nightshift, is it? You, my friend, must be the irresponsible type. I admire that in a passenger."

"Just get me where I'm going," Gabriel said, climbing in.

"Well, well, what are we, now?" The driver winked. "Finance? I love a financial man. You lot are the ones got us into this, you know, with your fourteen-hour days. If it weren't for your example, we'd all still be sleeping." He punched the auto-drive controls with a fat red thumb. "Time to make good on the investment, eh?"

The car set off, whirring through the downtown streets. Things were quiet right now, but that wouldn't last. Gabriel felt his wake-up pill pushing into the second stage, a nervous hyperclarity of chems and nanotech. The tops of the skyscrapers burned candle-like in the day's last rays.

"You know, I've a bit of a theory about the nightshift," the driver said, reclining and resting his hands on a burgeoning belly.

"That so?" Gabriel prepared to tune out. Everyone had a theory about the nightshift. Theories about the nightshift were as common as screenplay ideas.

"Mm-hm." The driver nodded: the profound, slow nod of the crank. "Way I see it, man was never meant to sleep. Not by night, anyway. Sleeping by night, living by day, that only came with recorded history. But if you go back, oh, ten thousand years or so, I believe all men used to be nocturnal."

There was something uncanny in the man's voice, Gabriel thought. Loaded, lock-jawed, overcontrolled. Like the driver held a bullet between teeth.

"How do you figure?"

"Well, think about it." The driver mashed more buttons, making the car chirp and kick. "What evidence've we got, that people slept through the night back then? This was thousands of years ago, mate. How can we even know? Monkeys are nocturnal. Apes are nocturnal."

"Are they?"

"Now, now, don't be pedantic. What we do know is this: those old Cro-Magnons, they had a sense of magic. Spirits, symbols, rituals, statues. A sort of, what would you say? A *fever*. The fever of—but what would your lot call it? Old-time religion." The driver paused, tongue fondling his mustache. "Bit like now, I'd say."

A soft sound emanated from the car speakers, the loudening bump of a tribal drum. But no, not drums, exactly. A pulse, electronic, granular units of compacted sound, growing steadily more basso, more booming.

"They didn't have wake-up pills back then," Gabriel said. Was it his imagination, or was the car going faster? And they were going downtown, the wrong way. "Maybe they didn't need wake-up pills," the driver said softly. "Maybe we don't need 'em, either. Ever try staying up a few nights without your pills? Tell you, mate, it's like nightshift, but a thousand times better. Puts you in touch with something. Lets you talk to the spirits that be."

"Are you sure we're going the right way?" Gabriel twisted in his seat.

The driver jabbed the dashboard. The windows went dark. "Diurnality," the driver said. "Now *that's* the aberration. Ten thousand years of sleeping through the night, and look what we got for it. Rationality. Sobriety. Descartes, the Enlightenment. Locke, Hume, all those sober types. What a lot of rubbish. Clearheaded and alert, that's what we all wanted to be. Creatures of the sun. So bloody alert, we just about wrecked the planet. Tell me, is that how things were meant to be?"

Gabriel found the button for the car's compass. A digital display made the windshield bright. Yes, they were definitely heading downtown. And going faster, too.

"Turn the windows clear," Gabriel said, "right now."

The driver laughed and patted the dashboard. "Nothing to see, friend! Car knows where she's going. 'Sides, it's nightshift. All bets off! Let the spirit take you, I like to say."

The car drove faster. The beat got louder. Now there were whoops and howls, too. The driver gave tuneless accompaniment:

Lullaby, lullaby, where will you go?  
Deep into dreamland, where all dreamers go.

"Stop this car," Gabriel said, leaning forward to hit random buttons.

The windows flickered, blinked, showed polygons flocking by. Then stars and planets, streaks of lightspeed. Fish and water, the Circuit de Monaco. The music changed to Rive-Gauche accordions, industrial metal, a nightclub croon.

The driver laughed, rocking in his ergo-gel car seat.

Lullaby, lullaby, where have you gone?  
I've gone into dreamland, where all go alone.

"Stop!" Gabriel shouted, and pushed open his door.

An alarm bleated. The car screeched and stopped. "Please keep all extremities within the vehicle," it urged in placid baritone, as Gabriel tumbled out into a pile of green trash bags.

By the time Gabriel picked the lettuce shreds from his suit, the driver was standing beside him.

"Here we are, then." He waxed his mustache from a tin.

"Where?" Gabriel sat up, scanning the dank alley.

The driver pointed to an illuminated steeple, thrusting obelisk-like above the rooftops. "Church of the Woken Spirit. Services from dusk to dawn. Five blocks off, but this'll do." He said with a smile, "I have found the light, my friend—in deepest darkness."

Gabriel sighed. The man was a Lunie, a worshipper of darkness and the Moon, on his way to a nightshift mass. Totally mad. You could never trust a nightshift driver. "What about your job?" Gabriel shouted, as the driver sauntered, whistling, up the street. "What about your car? What about *me*?"

"What about enlightenment?" the driver called back, and added with a thickening of his somewhat put-on British accent, "To be or not to be, that is the answer."

He turned the corner and was gone.

Taking refuge in the abandoned car, Gabriel managed to call up a map. He was still in the financial district, but that didn't mean he was safe. The black-marketeers would be abroad soon, conducting deals and trades amid the roots of the skyscrapers. Gabriel already heard hoarse cries, piped on pirated channels through street-level speakers. The pimps were out and about. The sidewalk pirates would soon follow.

Gabriel tried Marisol. No answer. He told his phone to keep trying, passing the time by looking up the phrase that had troubled his mind. *Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep.* He'd searched for so much music over the years that the online search-bots, wise to his profile, insisted on playing mostly songs. Dumb AIs. Thought they were too smart for user input.

At last, Gabriel found it. The car engaged autoplay. "Sleep no more!" said a scratchy voice, piped across the decades from some old recording, "Macbeth does murder sleep, the innocent sleep; sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care, the death of each day's life, sore labor's bath, balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course, chief nourisher in life's feast!"

Shakespeare. Of course. Not really Gabriel's cup of tea. Still, there was something to it, wasn't there? Humanity had murdered sleep, and what did they have to show for it? Twenty-hour workdays, skyrocketing crime. The trouble was, they'd done away with sleep, but they hadn't managed to do away with the *night*.

Shouts nearby. Shadows on the wall. Or was it just a wake-up pill hallucination? You could never trust your senses during nightshift, Gabriel had found. Couldn't trust much of anything, really.

Gabriel's phone rang, making him gasp. The phone interfaced automatically with the car. Marisol's face loomed huge in the windshield. "Mari, jeez! You scared me to death."

"Yeah, I can tell. You look awful. What's the matter?"

"You delivered me into the arms of a religious nut, that's what's the matter." Gabriel levered back his seat, trying to get a better perspective on Marisol's huge, down-staring face. "I told you the merc-drivers couldn't be trusted. They're all turning into Lunies. I'm downtown. Stranded."

"In the black market?" Marisol looked alarmed. "You'd better get out of there. Word is the sidewalk pirates are out in force. They're already holding three traders for ransom."

"Well, maybe you could give me some help with that. I need the real thing, Mari. True blue and black. The city's finest. I need a cop."

Marisol sighed, closing her eyes. "Even if I go off-book, Gabe, the cops won't go through the Village. Especially not tonight. There's some kind of carnival."

"Another carnival?" Gabriel groaned. Every nightshift, it seemed, the hipsters, pagans, nuts, druggies, freaks, and weirdoes of the Village threw a carnival. "What's the occasion this time?"

"You'd have to talk to a numerologist. Something to do with the Newgrange tumulus. Runic decipherments. Astral theories. Word around the force is, they're doing a human sacrifice."

"You're kidding."

"Well, it's not the real deal. One of those brainless bodies, lab-grown for research. Mount Sinai's getting rife with ghouls. Half the staff sells meat out the back."

"Don't those artsy bums have anything better to do?"

"They're living the dream, I guess. Party all night. At least it's good for business."

The liquor business, Mari meant. And the drug business, and the fast food business. Night was the time of vice, and vice was booming. With wake-up pills, parties around the world had gotten ever longer, wilder, weirder. Were people just bored with their extra time? Or did the dark hours have some kind of power all their own? Maybe the Lunie cults had a point.

"The carnivals are tame," Marisol said, "compared to what goes on uptown. You should see the police reports. Some of the kids who grew up with these pills? They really believe they're creatures of the night."

"I know about the batheads."

"Oh, no, you don't. Not the half of it. Not till you've worked municipal dispatch. The richer they are . . . We have kids on the Upper East Side . . . Gabriel? Gabe—?"

Marisol's face fractured, flickered, vanished. A sickly visage coalesced in the windshield. Hollow cheeks, pointed teeth, cigarette-burn eyes.

"Speak of the devil," Gabriel said.

"Tremble, mortal," said the vampire. "Vorgoth has found your signal. Vorgoth has picked up your scent."

Gabriel groaned. He should have known not to say the word "batheads" on a nonencrypted call. These sickos monitored communications throughout the city, waiting for the unwary to speak flagged keywords. Drop a mention of Nosferatu into a conversation, you could have some jerk in a polyester cape haunting your fire escape for weeks. "Invocation," the kids called it.

"You have spoken the words of doom, mortal. Now you must face your destiny."

This particular kid looked young. Like, preteen-young. Could just be some punk playing dress-up. Or maybe this kid had gotten the surgery, gone all-out. From the way he rolled his r's, Gabriel guessed he was a newbie.

Thing was, when it came to vampires, the newbies were the dangerous ones.

"Get out of my phone call, bathead."

"Silence, prey! You speak to a creature of darkness. Denizens of the sunnyside have no rights in my domain."

"Yeah, sure." Gabriel pressed the button to end the call. The car gave out an angry chirp.

"Attention. You have attempted to disconnect two conversant devices. Please wait until your devices determine that it's safe to terminate their connection."

"Wa-ha-ha," laughed Vorgoth from the windshield.

"It's a pirated phone call!" Gabriel shouted at the car. "Can't you identify a pirated call? I'm talking to a vampire, here."

"Correction," said Vorgoth. "The vampire is talking to you. Heed well my warning, beast of prey. With the rising of the Moon, death shall swoop upon you."

Gabriel pushed more buttons. Vorgoth, for all his sharp teeth, was small taters. If Gabriel didn't get moving, the black market would sweep him up. He'd fall prey to the naphthalene lassos of the sidewalk pirates. He'd be kidnapped, held for ransom. He'd miss work.

Sure enough, Gabriel heard shouts, footsteps, a booted troop's advancing tramp. He popped his head out the window. No sidewalk pirates seemed to be around, but a private security force came goose-stepping around the corner. A ragtag bunch, five men, all wearing red headbands. Every one of them save the leader carried crude tools of urban back-alley abuse: shockprods, billysticks, truncheons, bats.

The leader, an automatic rifle at his hip, marched backward at the head of the pack. "All right, boys, recon puts our nest at two blocks down. You got the 3-D map, you got the infrared. Now, these are rogue ransomers, remember, small and unequipped, and you know what that means. Unpredictable. We're talking

street-blitzkrieg, overwhelming force, no pulled punches. Their hostage is a property developer, middle-fifties, white male—”

On it went. Gabriel shook his head. These sad street forces always puffed themselves up with military airs. Acting like they were Green Berets, instead of some company's low-rent mercs.

The security team was nearing Gabriel's car when another force, bigger and better equipped, appeared at the opposite end of the street. These men wore green uniforms, pants and tunics, low-watt lasers. Gabriel recognized the security crew for Ballen's, a big ratings firm headquartered downtown.

The green force spanned the street, blocking passage. The red force halted near Gabriel's car. Trouble at the OK Corral, with Gabriel smack in the center. The Wild West, redux. With better guns.

“Look like you kids are lost.” The leader of the green force amplified his voice with a fist-sized mike. “The paintball arenas are out in New Jersey.”

“Eat a dog, Chang,” a red-team member retorted. The Ballen's force seemed to be all Vietnamese, while the red force was a motley mix. Gabriel wasn't surprised. A lot of these private forces had degenerated into gangs. After the wake-up pill revolution, with employees working day and night, it took half as many people to do the same work. Folks lost their jobs; unemployment broke 50 percent. Some of the rejects had turned to porn, some to drink, and most of the rest of them turned into crooks. City police couldn't handle the extra load, so private companies compensated with private forces. And human nature wouldn't be what it was, Gabriel supposed, if it hadn't taken all of a few years for those private forces to turn into clannish, territorial mobs.

“These are Ballen's corners.” Green leader drummed his fingers on the holster of his gun. “We are the only police on these streets.”

“Then you ain't doing your jobs,” red leader replied. “We tracked a hostage to your turf, Fu Manchu. Got some sidewalk pirates holding our boy, just down the block. Now, are you gonna help us take him home, or are we gonna open some skulls?”

“Give us the address. We will save him for you.”

“And pick up the bounty? Hell to that.”

Something unspoken passed between the two men. Green leader smiled. Red leader scowled.

“Don't tell me you're *in* on this, Won-ton.”

“A thousand per head,” the green leader said, “to come into our territory. Will you pay?”

So the green security team and the pirates were in league. Again, Gabriel wasn't exactly shocked. It was a typical scam, security teams in cahoots with sidewalk pirates. The red gang surely pulled the same stunt on their own turf.

Both teams were tense now, fingering their weapons. Gabriel doubted the red team had the moolah to pay their way onto the green team's turf. He also doubted this confrontation would end in hugs.

“Is the sheep anxious?” said Vorgoth from the windshield. “Is the sheep afraid?”

“Oh, shut up.” Gabriel jabbed dashboard buttons.

The car was still playing Shakespeare quotes. “To be or not to be,” a fuzzy voice said, “that is the question.”

“Not to be,” Vorgoth elected, and laughed.

The red security team advanced, shockprods ready. “We'll see how well you Commies bluff.”

Commies. An odd insult, it seemed to Gabriel. If anything, the Ballen's security team was a bit too entrepreneurial.

“To die,” said the voice from the dashboard, “to sleep no more; and by a sleep to say we end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to . . .”

*Sleep no more. Macbeth hath murdered sleep.*

"To die," Vorgoth overrode the canned quotes, "tis a consummation, sheep, devoutly to be wished."

The two rogue forces converged on the car.

*To die, to sleep . . .*

"Rods at the ready, boys!"

"Phasers out!"

*To sleep, to be . . .*

It clicked.

"To be or not to be," Gabriel said, imitating the escort's British accent. "That is the answer." He punched the car's buttons. *Nought*. The British said *nought* for zero.

2-B-R-0-2-B.

"Override engaged," the car intoned.

Gabriel hit the power button. The engine grumbled. He couldn't get his phone call to disconnect, but once he hit the gas, the car shrank Vorgoth's face to a tiny inset. The car bucked forward. Gabriel steered onto the sidewalk, around the red security team. Trash bags thumped and farted under the wheels. He swerved, scraping a wall.

"Run, sheep, run," Vorgoth chortled. "The hunt begins!"

Green light flashed in the street behind. Were the security teams shooting at him, or at one another? Gabriel rounded a corner on screeching wheels. He hadn't driven a car since he was a student in Ghana, before wake-up pills, before mass unemployment, before nightshifts and Lunie cults and a world of unintended consequences. He remembered puttering in his old Saipa around the Kinshasa university, dreaming of international finance, venture capital, innovation, the bright rich future.

Amazing how old skills came back, when a man was running for his life.

### 3: The Mighty Ram

**E**leven o'clock P.M. The city bright and alive. Under the barricades of the Chinatown compound, Gabriel huddled with his phone.

"Mari? You there?"

The Lunie cabbie's car was a twist of steel, partially wrapped around a concrete pylon. Gabriel always got twitchy while driving with a wake-up pill high. He'd run a merry chase through the downtown streets, scanning the alleys for batwing shadows, Vorgoth goading him from the windshield. At Canal Street, Gabriel had lost control. Vorgoth's pale face had disappeared in a spray of glass.

Thank God for airbags. Gabriel wrapped a Band-Aid around his bleeding thumb.

"Gabes?" Marisol's image came in startlingly clear. "Signal's great. Where are you?"

"Outside Chinatown. I had to ditch the car."

"Is that it behind you? That mashed-up wreck?"

"You know me and parallel parking." Gabriel absently kicked a rearview mirror. "At least I could have picked a worse place to crash. Always a hotspot here."

He glanced up at Chinatown's radiant towers. Twelve-foot ramparts shielded their splendor from the streets. Conversant in the language of the far side of the globe, the immigrants of this neighborhood had profited from round-the-clock corporate schedules. By day, by night, they kept up cross-hemisphere contact, doing business with the market maestros of Shanghai. Transcending the outdated day-night distinction had made them disproportionately rich.

"Dear, dear," Marisol said, managing to look at once worried and distracted. "You look all right. Do you feel all right?"

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"Ask me again when the rush wears off."

"You've got another rush coming," Marisol said. "If you're feeling up to it. I found you an escort. A bona fide cop."

Gabriel suppressed a whoop.

"He's ninth precinct," Marisol said. "He knows the Village like a tactical map. He's agreed to take you as far as the park."

"What's his price?"

"You'll have to take that up with him."

"Where do I meet him?"

"Zoner's Alley."

Gabriel groaned.

"It's the best I could do. At least it's close by." That distracted look came into Mari's face again, like she'd suddenly become aware of dark forces around them. "Hey? Gabes? Tell me something."

"Fire away."

"This mystery market event. This AI bubble. It's all over the news. The bot Pamplona, they're calling it: robo-bulls chasing humanity down the street. Everyone running long."

"What about it?"

"You have any idea what it might be?"

"I know what you know," Gabriel shrugged. "The AI modelers are onto something. Or they think they are. Predicting a biblically huge event."

"Like an interest rate change?"

Gabriel laughed. "No, God, bigger. Way bigger. AIs aren't like the human quants, Mari. Not likely to bite the bait of some little number dangled by a government bank. They think big picture. Society wide." Her frightened face worried him. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know." Marisol kneaded her neck. "The emergency lines are on fire tonight. It's wild. Networks are down. I heard the mayor's meeting with his cabinet. Even the president issued a statement."

"Oh, yeah? What'd he say?"

"Things are under control."

"Pretty terrifying." Gabriel ducked. A gang of hoods, passing the Chinatown compound, lobbed balled trash at the high brick walls. "I've got to get to Ribbeck, I guess. Ribbeck'll know."

"I sure hope so," Marisol said.

"He's the world's greatest trader," Gabriel said. "He sees the mind of God."

The Alley of the Zoners was a new subway tunnel. Twenty-hour work shifts meant high night ridership. The city had started construction on three new lines. But high unemployment yielded massive indigence. Bums, addicts, sundry hungry ghosts, now thronged to these manmade caves.

Gabriel shuddered as he walked along the rows of staring faces. Some people had strange reactions to wake-up pills. The chems kept them up all night, but not alert. They sat, eyes open, and stared, just stared. Stuck in a 3 A.M. torpor that never waned. Zombified, they shuffled through life, ate, spoke, but barely lived. Eventually most of them drifted down here, to sit out existence staring into the dark.

Why, Gabriel wondered, did they still take the pills? Their fixed faces suggested they were seeking something mystical, elusive, hopelessly internal, retreating forever from the restless world to stalk the waking-dreamscapes of an endless sleepless night.

Gabriel fought an urge to drop down among them. *To rest, to sleep, perchance to dream . . . How simple, how pleasant. And by a sleep, to say we end . . .* Something something something. He'd never been strong on the classics.

Truth was, Gabriel had feigned confidence with Marisol on the phone. Meeting with Ribbeck: this was the definition of a desperate mission. Ten years ago, Augustus Ribbeck had been the savviest trader who ever measured out his life in basis points. But ten years was an astronomical span of time in the trading world. And Ribbeck had retreated, pulled in his riskier bets, cut off personal contact, vanished into the agoraphobic gloom of his uptown apartment. He'd become a living ghost, never heard or seen. No one knew what the old coot might be up to. Gabriel doubted he'd even get to see the man.

"Sad, isn't it?"

Bright light cast a ghastly pallor on the pavement. The beam slid up to illuminate a nearby vacant face. The light source bobbed to the beat of approaching boots. "We should just let 'em wither away," said a voice behind the flashlight, as the beam swung over the array of staring zoners. "What a waste of the waking mind."

The flashlight was industrial strength, punishing. Gabriel lifted a hand to shield his eyes. In the byways of nightshift, where notoriety threatened death, only city employees dared to wield a light so bright.

"Are you my escort? The cop? Marisol sent you?"

The light angled away, glaring on haggard faces.

"Know what I think?" The cop's face was invisible, his voice gritty, harsh. "I think men are born with only so many waking hours. Like a finite store of thoughts, a stock of thinking minutes. Burn through 'em early, you turn into this. A brain-fried bum zoning out both day and night."

The light jogged, swung, made a pale pool on the pavement.

"Benjamin Colt." The cop put out a hand. "So you're the banker? Looking for a hiking companion? You gotta have a lot of disposable wealth, you wanna hire a guy like me."

"Not exactly," Gabriel said.

"Maybe you didn't understand me," said the cop. "When I say you gotta, I mean you betta."

Gabriel mentally tallied his tappable funds. "A hundred thousand now, same again on arrival."

"With inflation like it is? Whyn't you just blow your nose in my palm? In case you haven't noticed, kid, the markets are going loco. Money may be worth exactly dick by tomorrow." The light slid up Gabriel's legs, down his arms. "Tell you what. Give me your phone, watch, and rings right now, your necklace and shoes on arrival."

"My ring? My shoes? Are you serious?"

The light jumped. The cop's feet clopped in close. His face emerged from the darkness, young and sober, clean-shaven. He held out a palm.

"You bet I'm serious, son. This is police business."

As they came up into the glare of East Houston Street, the cop tossed Gabriel a police reflector vest.

"Better put that on, so they know you're with me."

Gabriel studied the gaudy yellow garment. "Impersonating an officer. Isn't that a crime?"

"Sure is, kid. You better not make me angry."

And so, glowing like two human torches with reflected luminescence, Gabriel and the cop worked their way through jammed traffic, across a littered sidewalk, into the east-side projects. A radio car would be useless on these streets, with zoners and revellers milling all around.

The project complex was a dark, brick fort. Overhead, bright windows watched the night. Mothers and fathers would be up there, Gabriel knew, guarding bolted doors, semis on hips and crowbars on knees, waiting out the long and lawless hours. Crime, made strong and bold by dark, pooled at the feet of these brooding towers.

Gabriel tripped. A blackened fender lay twisted underfoot. Nearby, a car, some kind of fancy German coupe, had been blown to a tangle of charred and jagged scraps. The melted windshield spilled, taffy-green, down the dashboard. Lately, police, overcome by rising crime, had been resorting to tactical strikes.

"Keep your attention to yourself," said the cop, "and don't say a damn thing."

"What are we doing here?" Gabriel tried to keep close. "I didn't ask for a tour of the projects. I need to get through the Village."

"Oh, you'll get there, Speedy, don't worry. I just got to make a quick stop."

They entered a tower through the glass front doors. Crowds of grim young men filled the lobby. The cop began to climb a stairway. Everything was surprisingly well lit. Extra cables had been strung on the walls. High-watt lamps, hanging from twisted wire, supplemented the standard municipal lighting. Men stood guard on every landing, unabashedly armed with big black rifles, stolid and disciplined as soldiers.

Five flights up, a guard blocked their climb. Gabriel looked past, peering up the stairwell. Laughter and music came echoing down, resounding from some floor high above. Children's laughter. Cheerful music. A woman's voice spoke in a lulling cadence, issued algebraic questions. Youthful voices chorused answers.

The stairwell guard made menacing motions.

"Hey." The cop snapped his fingers. "Snoopy. Get away from there." He grabbed Gabriel's arm. "That's none of your business. That's where the families live."

"It sounds like a school." Gabriel still leaned forward. "Like someone giving lessons."

"Sure does. Know why, genius? Cause that's what it is. Night school. You think any of these people are going to let their kids outside at night? They're breeding the next generation of Stephen Hawkings up there. Got a captive audience. But come on. Up above, that's *molto privato*. Our business is with Ram."

"Ram?"

Shaking his head at Gabriel's questions, the cop grabbed his arm and pulled him into a hall. They entered a living room identifiable as such only by a ceiling fan that stirred the sweaty air. Furniture, sofas, tables, sideboards, all must have been present, but were utterly concealed. At least fifty people packed the floor, watching a TV that took up one whole wall. A love scene played in vast hi-def, the actors' faces huge as doors. TV had made out famously post wake-up pill.

"It's my casino," the TV actress sighed in Spanish. "My cocaine. My problem."

"That is not important," cooed the male lead, close to her lips.

"And why not?"

"Because the Sun is down, the Moon is up, and you are a woman, and I am . . . a fiend!"

"Oh!" sighed the room in chorus, shivering through all its fifty-plus bodies as the actors joined their humongous mouths.

"What are we doing here?" Gabriel whispered.

The cop didn't answer, but tugged him through the rapt throng, toward an open door. In a contiguous kitchen, a young man, twenty-five at most, sat at a round table, bent over a pizza. "Well, look who it is," the guy said through a mouthful of cheese, looking up as they entered, shaking his head. "I guess I got to put some discipline in my crew. I keep telling 'em to shoot your corrupt ass on sight."

"Yeah, right," said the cop. "No BS tonight, Ramirez. I got this knucklehead with me, going uptown. You got my virgins?"

The young man, with a courtly sumptuousness of movement, still holding the pizza slice to his mouth, rose and knuckled open a door. In the bedroom beyond, three sullen boys sat on a bed, playing some kind of videogame with handcuffed hands.

"All tied up," said the young man, "and ready for delivery. IDs and dossiers at their necks. One assault, one firearm sale, one MJ possession."

"Possession?" The cop scowled. "Jesus, Ram. My guys aren't going to go for that. We got whole prison wings full of possession; nobody gives a flying fat one. Can't you get me a murder once in a while?"

"You want a virgin murder," said Ramirez, "you're going to have to do it yourself. Be grateful these young men stepped up like they did."

The cop stomped up to the third boy, tugging a cord that looped his neck. A plastic baggie pulled free of the boy's big T-shirt, flopped onto his chest. The cop grabbed it up in a fist.

"Possession. Christ. I'm starting to wonder about you guys. What kind of criminal underworld are you running here?"

The young man named Ramirez finished his pizza, dabbed his lips with a pink-striped dishtowel. "I promised you three felonies. Here are three felonies. You want a better bargain, lawman, change your laws."

Gabriel looked from man to man. His wake-up pill was in full effect, alertness became a mad pump in his head.

"What's going on?"

"Never you mind," the cop said. "Come over here and help me rope these dopes."

Ramirez handed over blue nylon rope. The cop looped it through the three kids' handcuffs, stringing them in sequence like a team of cows. He bade them stand with a snap of fingers. The three boys glared, still hunched on the bed.

"Come on, you fecal smears, hup to. You three idiots are now the temporary property of New York's finest scum-processing system, and that means you stand, squat, and fart on my say-so. You were fleet enough on your feet when you were attacking law-fearing folks and slinging kif. Speaking of which, Ram, you said one of these was an assault. What kind of assault are we talking, here?"

Ramirez waved a languorous crust. "Oh, that's Jacko, here. Got the mean reds one night, hurled a pineapple at his lady's head."

"Jesus," said the cop. "That all?"

"It was a pretty big pineapple," said Ramirez. "It was high-velocity."

"You know how many numbnuts in this town are throwing high-velocity fruit at their ladies right this moment? Ramirez, come on. I thought we had a clear deal. Three virgins a week. Used to be you'd get me at least a grand larceny. Now it's, what? Pineapple throwers? Dope dealers? You know how ever-loving common this crap is? I could walk into any building in this town and find you a gun-selling, dope-owning, pineapple-throwing wife-assaulter, all in one. It's a wake-up pill world. This shit's the new normal."

"Hey, don't tell me." Ramirez pressed his chest. "I'm only selling what you buying, badge-man. 'Sides, Jacko here's the real deal. He almost killed the woman. Just about took off her head. We got documentary evidence. Look at his baggie. We got proof."

"Proof this loser is only doing what every sadsack, shrewbitten shrunknut in this town wants to do after being cooped up talking to his woman all night, every night, since the world got wake-up pills."

The cop grabbed the baggie around the kid's neck, gave its contents a grudging glance. The boy called Jacko, Gabriel noticed, looked as if he was getting restless. The boy called Jacko looked as if he might be starting to feel a little what you might call violent inside.

"We got a whole city here," the cop went on, "living on spousal abuse and grass clippings. This is not true crime, Ram. This is what keeps people going."

"Did I mention the lady nearly died?" said Ramirez. "Did I mention she was wearing glasses?"

"Cry me a river."

"Did I mention she was a cop?"

The tone of the room became dense with excitement, as if a little bomb of aerosolized adrenaline had gone off.

"Well, now, that's different." The cop dropped the baggie, rubbing his hands. "That's really something." He grabbed the end of the nylon rope, tugging hard. The three tied boys jerked up from the bed. The cop sidled up to the boy called Jacko, peered appreciatively into his sweat-shined face. "This is finally some prime steak. Cop killer, huh? Would-be, anyway. With a pineapple, no less. That's some serious disrespect."

Jacko's throat, Gabriel noticed, was convulsing in the way a throat convulses when either spit is being worked up or vituperation is being suppressed.

"This may actually be a bonehead worth breaking," said the cop, pulling the rope to draw Jacko close. "You're with me, cop-beater. Come to papi. You gonna be my special friend."

The boy named Jacko looked displeased.

"Just remember your side of the agreement," said Ramirez.

"Oh, don't worry, Ram. I'll treat your boys right."

#### **4: Jacko Loco**

**O**ut on the street, a cop copter was circling low, probing the overgrown grounds of the projects with a tightly focused beam. Gabriel followed the cop and team of roped boys into the smelly recess between two vastly overfilled dumpsters.

"So what's all this craziness about?" Gabriel said.

"Eh?" The cop leaned out between the towering heaps of trash, squinting as a hail of plastic spoons and warm drops and noodle containers came shaking and raining from some window high above. He pointed at the circling chopper. "Keep your head low, Speedy. Those copter jockeys always pull this stunt, flyby my pickup and try to boost the game. We got a fine prize, for once; I'm not letting some whirligig streetsweeper lift a documented cop-assaulter off my hands."

"But what're we doing? Where are we going? Why are we bringing three petty criminals with us?"

"Not too bright, are you, for a man in a ten-thousand-dollar shirt? Thought you finance types were supposed to be the whizzest kids who ever dropped out of Harvard."

"But who are these guys?" Gabriel persisted.

The police helicopter moved on. The cop gave a tug on the nylon rope. Gabriel and the three prisoners shuffled and stumbled across the small desert of trash that filled the former promenade between two files of project towers. The cop, pulling the rope, set a jaunty pace. Gabriel, holding the tail end, trotted behind.

"Look," called back the cop. "Let's keep this simple. We're going to the park. Through the Village. Exactly where you wanted. Now, if you're as smart as your pay-check says you are, Speedy, you'll know that's all you *need* to know."

"And these prisoners, they're—"

"Yo!" The boy called Jacko halted short. The rope jerked tight in Gabriel's hand. "I don't wanna do this," Jacko said. "I changed my mind. I wanna go back."

"You," said the cop, coming close to Jacko's face, "don't have a mind to change, *pendejito*. You got exactly as much volition in this as a hundred-dollar douche. Your only

role from now into foreseeable futurity is to open up wide and take whatever I decide to ram into you."

"I got . . ." Jacko's face was writhingly alive. He looked to Gabriel rather as if fat worms of anxiousness were squirming under his skin. "I got a mean feeling in me, man. I think I did a bad thing."

"You did a bad thing? You bet you did a bad thing. You threw spiny fruit at a lady-cop's face. You know what the book on that reads like?"

"No, man, I mean . . . I ain't thinking right. I flipped a bad switch. You gotta send me back."

"Listen, you walking digestive stain." The cop got closer. "You volunteered for this. You gave up your right to a free life twice over, once when you did the crime, twice when you copped to the culpability. So don't tell me any tearful tales."

Over Jacko's shaking shoulder, the cop spoke to Gabriel. "Don't listen to this rock-biter. He knew what he was doing." He sighed. "Okay, see, Ram and me, we have a kind of arrangement. As you and every other civilian in this town has got to know, there's no way any normal police force is gonna keep up with all the crime we're seeing. That means the politicians get in a tizzy, and politically speaking, it's all about the numbers. How many busts, how many bums behind bars. So here's what we do, down on the streets where it matters. Ram, I pay him a nominal monthly fee, he rustles me up a couple small perps. Virgin offenders, no record to cause complications. I boost my stats without a hassle, Ram and his fellow bigshots get left alone, the mayor or gets his numbers, and any of these trivial pissants who step up, they get to pop their prison cherry with minimal fuss, do some credible time on a lowball crime. Which is apparently a good deal if you're a piece of creeping street-filth and having a jail stay under your belt's your only hope of getting respect. It's happy-joy-joy, all around."

"So this . . . ?" Gabriel backed half-consciously from Jacko's convulsive face. "You actually pay these criminals to turn themselves in?"

"Hey." The cop shrugged. "It's a high-productivity culture. Everybody's gotta keep up. All the pressure we're under these days, the department's taking tips from the masters. Stack ranking, aka, rank and yank. If you don't have the numbers, you're out on your ass. What I do, this is called streamlining a process. This is law enforcement in a wake-up-pill world."

"But doesn't that mean . . ." The financier in Gabriel couldn't let it go. "Doesn't that mean you're essentially paying people to break the law?"

"Better me than the next guy." The cop shrugged. "If our precinct doesn't do it, some other precinct will."

"I got . . ." Jacko's pulsing throat muscles now nearly throttled his speech. "I gotta go back . . . I got . . . something in me . . ."

The cop chuckled. "Whatta you got in you, *cabron*? Pray tell." Leaning in to hear the whispered answer, the cop chuckled harder. "A *killer*? Is that what you said? You got a *killer* in you? Well, son, you're in luck. 'Cause I got the cure." From beneath his poison-yellow coat came a dark semi-auto. "There you go, killer." The cop waved the gun under Jacko's nose. "Get a good look. One tight fistful of commissioner-issued stopping power. So you take a touch on this cool steel and feel the killer in you just melt away."

The cop stroked Jacko's cheeks with the gun. Jacko shuddered at the muzzle's caress. His bared teeth grated like cubes of ice.

"Listen, finance man," the cop said. "You got your answers, now here's the executive summary. You have your business, I have mine. And I seriously doubt anyone in this town has clean hands. I've got a contact up at the park who's waiting to take these cattle in. All we gotta do is cross through the Village. Look at it like this. It's

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the new Wild West, and you and me, we're just a couple lonesome ol' *vagueros*. And we've got three head of prime meat here, to herd through a great divide."

### The Village.

Once upon a time, Gabriel knew, the Village had been fashion Mecca, a bohemian Babylon, a gay utopia. But that was all pre-wake-up pill.

The Village, now, was a second Gomorrah.

All night, the streets in this area glowed with Roman-candle light. Pothole bonfires, multicolored chemical torches, the lambent reflections of firelit windows, all filled Broadway from dusk to dawn with a wavering glare. In this ever-spirited sector of the city, the acolytes of libertine self-investigation had leased the dark territory of the night for experiments with personal release that year by year grew steadily weirder. Was it boredom, Gabriel wondered, the tug of the Moon, some lupercalian dream lurking in darkness itself? Wickermen on the tenement rooftops went up nightly in whuffling flame; masked figures moved through the steps of obscene dances; drugs, illegal or legal, circulated through the alleys like scurrilous words; gluttons fed to the point of purgation on street-food feasts. In the Village, promiscuity wasn't just a liberty. It was law.

Gabriel hoped they'd get through alive.

The cop led their little cohort west on Fourth. Something big seemed to be afoot. The streets were weirdly barren of crowds. A few coked-up reprobates gibboning on fire escapes, a few of the usual fornicating shadows. But where, Gabriel wondered, were the expected mobs, the orgies, the madcap dancing?

"Party seems to have hit a hiatus." The cop jerked the rope to draw their little group tighter. "Either that, or some big blowout's in the works."

"Maybe they called off the party," Gabriel said. "Maybe these kids have heard the news."

They walked a silent block past sierras of trash.

"News," the cop said, after a moment, as they neared Broadway. "And what is the news, exactly? You mean this market turmoil? All this crazy business people are talking about, AI raiders run amok. Tell me, you're a finance man, Speedy. You got any inside word?"

Gabriel looked up as they passed a sort of gate, glossily vitrine, compiled of a recent party's discarded bottles. Above the buildings of NYU, nightshift's usual swarm of helicopters shed rattling echoes over the town.

"Personally?" Gabriel sighed. "If you ask me? I think all this fuss is for exactly nothing." He shrugged. "The news is that people think there's news. We see this every time the AI models spike. It's a panic. It'll pass."

"But these AI traders—"

"The robo-quants?" Gabriel shook his head. "There's nothing special about them. They're doing what every gambler does. They're trying to predict the future."

Amazing, how silent the streets were tonight. A sonic pressure built in the distance, as if a thousand people were gathered nearby, still out of sight but talking softly.

"Predicting the future," said the cop. "But that's news, isn't it? These robots, they're predicting something big, right? Well, if it's big and it's the future, boy, I want to know."

"Wouldn't we all," Gabriel said. "But prediction, that means different things to different people. And it sure as heck means something different to a computer."

That weird, steady sound was getting stronger, less a detectable noise than a subliminal pressure. Gabriel felt strangely excited. He walked fast, tugging the rope, throwing the others off balance. No trader could help but be driven to heights of nerdy rapture by the semi-sybilline mystery of the AI quants.

"So, take tomorrow." Gabriel skirted a vomit splash. "Here's a prediction for you. The Sun will rise, water will still be wet, billions of people will mostly honor their contracts. So what? Or how about this: maybe three world leaders will be assassinated, there will be mass panic, the markets will crash, and civilization will collapse. But who could ever predict that? And why bother betting on it? See, we're all trying to find the sweet spot, events that are predictable, but not too predictable. Events at the razor margin of predictability."

"You're losing me," said the cop.

"And me, and my fund manager, and every other human on the planet. Because here's the thing. These AI modelers, their idea of predictability is totally different from ours. They've got more data. They've got better math. And they've got a very, very different way of placing bets."

"So they're better gamblers?"

"Who knows?" Gabriel paused, tugging the rope, making the cop turn back and see his shrug. "I'm saying, the AIs are so advanced, it's like a whole different game. It's not about investments, or optionality, or shadow derivatives, or complex instruments, or even portfolios of conditional orders. These machines, they're trading models of the world itself. Simulated timelines, huge multidimensional constructs. Probabilities and chaos-theory a million times as intricate as the craziest climate model. And the thing is, these AIs are so alien, so far beyond us, that no one can really explain what they're doing. We don't even know if their predictions will come true. All we can do is glance into their crystal ball, hope to see something we understand."

"But you don't understand it," said the cop. "None of you smart guys do. Not tonight."

"What I think?" Gabriel said. "I think we've come to Delphos."

They turned a corner and saw the source of that faint subsensory tightness in the air. A massive crowd had gathered on Broadway, jamming the lopsided star of Astor Place. All the mad urchins, kooks, layabouts, marabouts, fiends, and artistes of the Village were here, and all attending to some spectacle just out of sight. A hush contracted like shrink-wrap around the crowd, swathing the tattooed and unwashed bodies in a crackling static of suspense.

"High times in Whackoland," said the cop.

Gabriel barely heard. "The Delphic oracle," he murmured into the hush. "That's who the Greeks used to go to for advice. What's going to happen, what does it mean? And now these AI modelers, they're like prophets to us. But when you listen to an oracle, you never get a straight answer. You have to interpret. You have to figure out what it means."

"Bull."

A tug on the nylon rope made Gabriel trip. Behind him, Jacko's eyes were bulging, webbed red. The poor kid's head looked like the swollen portion of a squeezed balloon.

"You crazy," Jacko said, "finance man. Like every smart person I ever known. Trusting computers. Son, you ever use a computer? Computers are a joke, man. Computers are insane."

"Easy, boy," the cop said.

"Computers?" Jacko's muscles were jumping. "You ever see what they do? Computers freeze. Computers get hung. Computers, they loop, they never unloop. I'll tell you what you could do with your computers. You gotta shut. Them. Down."

"Heel, boy." With the rope wound tight in his fist, the cop jerked Jacko's leash. Jacko staggered.

"You sure he's all right?" said Gabriel.

"He's got a killer in him, remember?" The cop chuckled. "Probably got a fat lady and a talking dog in there, too, and all of 'em trying to run the show. Don't worry, son. Long as we keep this nutjob leashed, we'll be okay. Anyhoo. You were saying. This big AI bubble. You think it's just some really long bet?"

Gabriel couldn't pull his eyes from Jacko's empurpled face. "Well, I don't know. It could be an event two hundred years down the road. Or a complex of events, all very contingent. It could be an event so subtle, so global, so fundamental, we wouldn't even notice if it happened. The point is, we not only don't know: When it comes to guessing what these AI quants are calculating, we human beings probably can't even imagine."

The crowd down Broadway let out a soft cheer. Jacko's eyes were gumball-sized. Gabriel peered down nearby streets. "We'd better find another route."

"Hell," said the cop, "this is the most direct way. And I wanna see what these freaks are up to."

Gabriel opened his mouth to object, but the cop was already walking. They made their way toward the edge of the crowd. The cluster of bodies seemed less dense up close. Here, the yellow police vests proved to be of service. People parted to watch them sidle by. Hating eyes glared from beneath scraggly bangs. The scene was almost inconceivably motley: tats, rags, piercings, punk accoutrements, every counter-cultural mutation of fashion since the Beats. "Get out of here, pigs," sneered an unlocatable voice. Someone spat.

The cop waved his gun.

"Keep it up, you miserable vermin, and I'll call this whole shindig in as an anti-American rally. Believe me, a couple of well-placed words, I could have this square eyeball-deep in drone ordnance."

Gun aloft, the cop wended toward the square's center. A clear space surrounded the cube-like central statue. Chemical odors tainted the otherwise sweat-scented air. Three concentric rings of torches kept the crowd at bay. Within the inner ring, robed figures in pale, blank gloves and masks circulated ceremonially, shuffling, stooping, attending to at least two dozen gurneys.

And on each gurney, under a sheet, lay a body.

## 5: Carnival

**G**abriel was thinking about the market.

In his first years out of Kinshasa, Gabriel had seen himself as something of a calm metrician, carefully testing possible bets in the fine-tuned scales of common sense. But in New York, living the Wall Street life, he'd found that high finance was a lot weirder than classroom models. Real-life finance, it was mostly about imagination. Imagination: trying to guess what billions of people would do in the next few years. Imagination: trying to guess what billions of people were guessing about other people. Imagination: trying to guess what kinds of bets irrational actors might make about other irrational actors.

Imagination—and now the AI traders had taken off, and it was all about trying to guess what irrational people might guess about what other irrational people were guessing about the borderline impenetrable divinations of a group of latter-day oracles.

Investors, traders, bankers: Gabriel had come to see them all as masters of imagination, the real artists of a technocratic age. Prophets, philosophers, seers, explorers.

Ten years ago, Augustus Ribbeck had been a prophet par excellence. But how sharp could those famous eyes, with their iconic round glasses, still be? The work of banking on imagination ran 24/7. And Ribbeck, old recluse, never left his home.

A stir in the Village crowd drew Gabriel's attention back to the square. The robed warlocks of this hipster rite were turning down the gurney sheets. Each uncovered a lifeless face: a curly haired woman, a large bald man: humans of every model, all

inert. Dummies, or maybe mummies, born without brains and rapid-grown in the round-the-clock-factories of biotech empires. Gabriel remembered Marisol's warning. Medical cadavers. Human sacrifice. What were these coo-coo revelers planning to do, cut out two dozen hearts?

"This is looking to be ne-plus-ultra sicko," said the cop. "This is looking to be life-sentence-grade illegal."

"Come on, man." A reveler in front of them turned around, like some stoned concertgoer chiding folks whose chatter spoiled the show. "Leave the negativity at home, okay?"

"What's going on?" Gabriel rose on tip toes, mentally dredging whatever he could remember of the darker side of Western history. "Is this some kind of Satanic ritual?"

"Whoa, dude." The reveler leaned back, laughing, holding up his hands. "You got a dark mind. We're just having a little fun." Eyes blinking with dryness, naked torso knotted, the guy bent his immensely tall body over their heads, talking with the blank gregariousness of the very, very stoned. "It's like, art, you know? Like a kind of Samhain-Tim-Burton-Siege-of-Leningrad happening. Nothing to get all paranoid about. Just gonna have us a little zombie dance."

The druidic priests were bending over the cadavers, now, prying open their mouths, packing them full of little purple pills. They poured in water and shuffled back. The bodies, obviously not alive, were yet evidently not quite dead. They swallowed reflexively, spasmed, sat up. Their naked skin flushed with the warmth of life.

"These medical cadavers are same crazy biotech, yo." The stoned guy shook his head. "Guess they have to make them mostly alive, you know? So, like, people know what they're dissecting, right? But check this out." He flapped his arms. A nearby cadaver, a small Asian woman, turned on him her glassy gaze. Slowly, stiffly, like a doped stroke victim, the dead woman mimicked his movements, waving. "It's all sensory-motor," said their stoned cicerone. "Nothing but a brainstem. Monkey see, monkey do."

"But what'd you give them?" Gabriel shuffled back instinctively as the horde of cadavers stumbled to its feet. "What are those pills?"

"What else, man?" The stoned guy did a little jig. "They're what got you here. They're what keep this whole city dancing. Wake-up pills! Pack enough in, turns out you can bring the almost-dead to almost-life."

The corpses, the zombies, whatever they were, began to totter and sway around the clearing. The robed figures, necromancers, artists, whatever *they* were, mimicked their movements, initiating a slow and drunken dance. And now Gabriel heard music. Curious music. A fluttery drumbeat. A pokey sort of whistle. A rabble of a marching band came strutting through the square. Drums, brass, distorted guitars: a whole punk-metal marching column, playing at max loudness.

The necromancers danced. The cadavers danced along. A lurching, crooked, horrible dance. Stiff limbs swinging. Drugged eyes staring. Strings of drool wagged from the chins of half-alive bodies that stumbled around as if the world were tipped. The priests stripped nude. The crowd did, too. A jumpy excitement shot through the gathered bodies, as if the city had been shaken like a huge pinball machine.

"Here!" The stoned guy held out a fistful of pills. "Join in the moment, lawmen. Trust me, you never felt anything like a massive OD on your own waking mind."

"No!" Jacko, though his hands were still tied, swung his head down and smashed away the pills. "No more."

Jacko's body tightened like a trapped animal's. Thrashing, tugging at the rope, he jerked the cop into the crowd's sweaty welter. The cop shouted a warning, but Jacko had gone mad. Maybe the music had gotten into him. Gabriel could understand. It was awful, evil, insane, this music. An imminent madness tugged at the tune. The marching beat hardened, going loud and angry.

Gabriel suddenly realized: he knew this piece. But from where?

Screaming, "I can't take it, I can't take it," Jacko clawed a path through the crowd. Hardly anyone seemed to care. The dance was changing, turning mean. The zombies seemed to set the style: stiff limbs waving, stomping, drool. Gabriel took an arm in the face. Lashing out in response, he felt his knuckle clip tooth.

Zombies imitating dancers who imitated the zombies who then refined their imitation: who could call this anything but madness? People whooped and laughed. The music had gone shrill. Horns blared a warlike theme. Drums clattered. Guitars screamed.

Gabriel had it: Shostakovich's Seventh. Specifically, the notorious section known as the Invasion March, a passage of such swaggeringly awful taste that it still sparked contention in classical music circles.

Purportedly this had been the Russian composer's theme music for the Nazi attack on Leningrad. Some said it had rather been written as a veiled critique of the creeping madness of Stalinist Communism. In a music appreciation class, years ago, Gabriel's instructor, perhaps muddling his history, had interpreted the piece as a sarcastic burlesque of militarism and nationalism and rationalism and indeed, all the reigning isms of Western civilization.

And maybe there had been something to that, Gabriel thought. Maybe there was truth to that critique. Because Gabriel now realized, thanks to these frolicking hedonists and their undead dance partners, that the weird little tune, with its silly beginning, its building beat, its swelling hysteria, had for him still another significance. This was the music of the market, the Wall Street rag, the trader's theme: this swaying, tiddly, half-mad march. This was the tune, or akin to the tune, that Gabriel seemed to hear playing at all times now, somewhere behind the ticking numbers that crawled all year, in a glowing reflected drizzle, over his eyeballs: the ditty of nonstop day/night trading, steadily building from a gentle seduction to a panicked cataclysm.

Jacko thrashed through the storm of dancers, dragging their posse like a big snagged fish. "I can't!" he gabbled. "I don't want to. I'm changing my mind. I'm going back."

"Heel, puppy." The cop drew his gun.

"Wait!" Gabriel reached out. The dancers, oblivious, didn't even clear a path. Gabriel could hardly tell now which were alive and which were dead. The whole square had become one jittering clot of naked, aimless, mindless movement, the dead imitating the living, the living the dead, and all merged in a single, stiff, lurching orgy.

Jacko had somehow acquired the strength of seven men. A bucking, foaming stallion of a boy, he pulled the cop and group of cons. His remonstrations came in spittle-choked explosions. "I . . . didn't mean it . . . man . . . I just get . . . so . . . angry."

The cop leaned on his heels. The rope tangled in the crowd. Their little train netted additional bodies. Everyday physics had become a source of confusion: was Gabriel running or crowdsurfing or crawling? He found himself holding Jacko by the shoulders.

"It's the work, man." Jacko's lips seemed to have developed a sudden, squirming fear of touching his teeth. "You don't understand. Day, night, day, night, picking through trash. Waste reclamation, man, twenty-two hours a day, that was my gig. And you can't slack off, never, you gotta keep giving 200 percent. Day, night, day, night. Shit, I wish they never made those pills. At least, in the old days, you could sometimes forget. At least in the old days, you could sometimes dream."

"You think you got it tough, *señor*?" The cop pulled Jacko out of Gabriel's hands. "I spend twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, chasing malcontented scum like you. So don't start sobbing on my uniform."

"Man, these kids are right." Jacko slumped from the cop's arms, eyes rolling over the square's abounding madness. "They put their finger right on it, yo. These days, we're all doing a zombie dance."

Jacko seemed at once exhausted and enraged. The zombie crowd still shambled around them, artsy wastrels in an avant-garde display. Watching their waving limbs, Gabriel realized he himself could hardly remember the routines of the pre-wake-up-pill world. Jacko was right: the present had become an endless daze. Wake-up-pills had divided all people along a crack of fractured time. Once, every person's life had alternated rest and work. Now half of humanity hoarded labor, a round of endless, overstimulated strain. And half of humanity idled, wasted away, with nothing to do but drugs and dirty business.

"I tried to end it, y'know?" Jacko held Gabriel's arm. "Sign off, bail out, check in, pay up. Only way a person can rest, these days, I mean, really rest, like, really-really. These kids are right about that, too. That's what I wanted. Keep poppin' those pills. Keep poppin' and poppin', till I went to sleep, forever and for true and for always and for good."

The zombie dance had gotten, it seemed to Gabriel, seriously, immoderately, inadvisably wild. These kids were going to party till they dropped, till exhaustion reined in their raging nerves and pulled them down into blissful torpor. Ashes to ashes, they would all fall down, the dead among the living, the living like the dead.

"Look at this." The cop turned in a circle, fondling his gun like a lucky charm. "This is sick, what this is, I tell you, finance man, this is *deranged*."

The music seemed unlikely to cease. A single theme repeated to the point of hair-pulling aggravation. The dance, as well as wild, had become insufferably sweaty. The cop, winding Jacko's leash around his arm, hefted his Glock.

"Um," Gabriel said.

"You know what burns me up, Speedy?" The cop's face, mirroring Jacko's in mood, was lit rippling gold by a chemical torch. "What burns me up is you high-finance types, investors, innovators, all these bums with their petty crimes, and these spoiled kids with their artsy parties—you're the ones who wanted this. Stay up all night, every night. And why? I'll tell you. 'Cause all you people believe in freedom."

A naked dancing girl, maybe alive, maybe not, jostled the cop. For a moment Gabriel thought she'd get a bullet in the nose. The cop caught her face in a splayed hand and shoved her, wheeling, back into the crowd.

"Freedom. Oh, yeah. You thought this would be just one big fun freedom-fest, running wild under the Moon. Break the rules, have a high old time. What else is the nighttime for? You never thought about the people like me. People who're supposed to keep your precious freedom from getting a little *too* free, know what I mean? 'Cause Lord knows, y'all want everyone *else* to follow the rules. So here's me, running down a pack of rats who never sleep. And if maybe I try to swing a few deals, pump my numbers on the side, well, hell, that's not allowed. 'Cause that kind of thing's only for gamblers and hustlers, and Johnny Law's got to mind his Ps and Qs."

"I hear you," said Gabriel. "Believe me, I do."

"Oh, yeah? And what about this degenerate?" The cop turned his gun on Jacko, still bucking like a bull.

"We're all in this together," said Gabriel. "We're all working hard."

"Maybe so. But the difference is, I'm working at making peace. You're working at making money. But all this jackass is working at is making trouble."

Jacko looked ready to pop like a bottle rocket, take off toward the circling copters whose dark rotors continually whapped the night.

"You better settle your skinny self down," the cop said, "or so help me, son, I will put you down."

"Wait. Listen." Gabriel clapped a hand to the cop's arm. "I don't think he can help it."

"Help what? His killer inside? It's the killer right here he better worry about."

"There is no killer inside. That's not what he said."

"I'm giving a final warning, son. Heed or bleed."

Shaking his head to the swing of the music, Jacko pulled them toward a voided building. "Hell with this," the cop said, and shot him.

At the invisible impact, Jacko fell. A scream trilled up, all around. Gabriel, cursing in his mother's Akan, hurried forward. Jacko's calf was pumping blood. The boy's pupils described arcane curves. "You didn't have to do that." Gabriel knelt and unbuckled from his belt the first aid kit he carried with him every nightshift.

"Don't worry," the cop said, "he'll be all right. Just helping him tame that killer inside."

"He said *pills*." Gabriel shook a fist as if rolling dice. "Not killer. *Pills*. As in wake-up pills. As in, he overdosed. Before he surrendered. As in, this kid felt so guilty about what he did, he was trying to kill himself. There is no killer inside. This guy is running on a massive hormonal rush. If we don't get him to a hospital, his heart could literally burst."

"Ha!" The cop's head rocked. "How's that for justice?"

"We've got to help him."

"Maybe this'll calm him down." And the cop shot Jacko two more times.

"What are you doing?" Gabriel screamed.

"Relax, pencil-neck. It's nonlethal. Watch."

At the first crack of the gun, the music had stopped. At the second and third, the dance dissolved. The crowd stampeded, screaming, in a thousand conflicting currents. At least, that's what Gabriel thought was happening. It was hard to distinguish mass panic from the dance.

The cop fired blindly. *Crack-crack-crack*. Naked revelers stumbled and bled. The stampede built without picking a direction. The two remaining convicts—stirred, Gabriel supposed, to unaccustomed heroism by this singular display of unrestrained psychopathy—made a stumbling attempt to tackle the cop, but he swung his gun with the lazy lethality of a flask-a-day actor in a forties western and felled both men in one limp-wristed fusillade. Gabriel staggered back as, smiling, the cop struck the classic smoke-blowing pose that signals an end to sharpshooting vigilantism.

"It's auto-aiming, see?" The cop flourished the gun. "Just point and pull. Got a little computer in me, flawless targeting. They're making every cop get 'em, now."

"But you—you—"

The cop laughed. "Son, it's all right. They kept busting me for excessive force, so I finally gave in and hacked my implant. Now I can only shoot for the limbs. It's automatic. Pretty clever, huh?"

Gabriel, still trying to comprehend what had happened, began to sputter about the very obvious flaws with this plan: about unpredictable ricochets, infections, malfunctions, moral hazard.

"Hey?" The cop pressed the air. "Calm down, son. It's your tax dollars at work. Behold the miracle of high-tech crimefighting. I could fire into this crowd all night, wouldn't do more'n give the hospitals some work. Look."

And the gun was swinging toward Gabriel, now, the face behind the foreshortened barrel rutilant with reflected flame. And Gabriel saw that, like his wolfish fellow traders, like the Lunie cab driver, like the sidewalk pirates and their mercenary foes, like the zoners in their subterranean trance, like this roistering horde of amped-up zombie dancers, like all the fast-living souls in this city that now quite literally never slept, the policeman was, very likely, completely insane.

"You'll barely even feel it," the cop said, finger curling around the trigger.

And it was a funny thing, Gabriel thought. Damned amusing, when you got right down to it. Because Gabriel could have run. He could have charged. He could have used the quick-and-dirty combat training Marisol had given him five years ago, when the nightshifts of the post-wake-up-pill world passed a critical point on their accelerating slide into anarchy.

But Gabriel did none of those things. Absurd, really. A potentially nonlethal wound, a hospital stay, a sedative-assisted convalescence in a clean-sheeted bed . . . what Gabriel saw, staring down the cop's gun, was an-all-too-tempting opportunity to finally stop, lay down his head, and sleep.

So, eyes closed, Gabriel waited for the shot that would deliver him into blessed unconsciousness.

It never came.

Gabriel opened his eyes.

The cop was gone.

The screaming revelers had nearly dispersed. A few naked bodies lay trampled in the square. Jacko and the other two convicts, holding frayed rope, were staring with wide eyes into the sky, where the full Moon had just risen above the Village rooftops.

From a dark window of the voided building, a shredded yellow police vest fluttered to the sidewalk.

"Tremble, mortal," a dark voice boomed. "Your armed companion is no more."

"Oh, God, no," Gabriel said.

"No help is at hand, sheep, and the hunt nears its end. The mighty Vorgoth will dine well tonight."

"Good God." Gabriel scrambled to his feet, heading north on Third. Something black and fleet flapped overhead.

"Truly, sheep, the night air is ripe with the smell of your fear."

Gabriel already had his phone out. "Marisol? Marisol?"

His wife's weary face appeared in the jogging screen.

"I knew something like this would happen," Marisol said.

"You'll never guess."

"Oh, but let me try." Marisol squeezed the bridge of her nose. "The vampire's back. There's been a trash avalanche. The rats are swarming in Union Square. The Sisters of Artemis are hunting stray men. You got caught in a drug-fueled zombie dance. The Lunies are having a parade. It's a vigilante thing. A motorcycle thing. A drug thing. It's all three. Mobs of children are suffering again from delusional mass panics. Someone spotted a UFO in the park. A monster. The vengeful ghost of Mel Gibson. The CHUDs are rising."

"Got it in one," Gabriel said. "With bonus points for five."

In the jouncing screen, Marisol, with practiced smacks, shut off her dispatcher equipment and stood. "All right, Gabe, I'm coming. Yet again, I'm leaving work early, risking my career, to save my hubby's ass. Tell me, hon, are we ever going to just spend a day in?"

A shadow swung from a streetlight above. Gabriel ducked as pale claws snatched at his head. Vorgoth's laughter squeaked like a child's.

"Run, sheep, run. Prolonging the hunt only whets my appetite."

"At this point, Mari, I think I'd settle for surviving the night."

"Don't worry about that." Marisol reached beneath her desk, hauling up a piece of equipment the size and shape of a monster water blaster. "I'm on my way. And I'm bringing my pain ray."

## 6: The Guru

In the milky light of dawn, a battered police moped carrying two passengers pulled to the curb of Seventy-Third Street. A strip of construction tape clung to the front leg

shield. A two-foot white-oak splinter had pierced the acrylic windscreen. A knotted tie and a remnant of a vampire's cape trailed limply from the rear wheel.

Marisol dismounted, shaking plaster from her hair. "End of the line, Gabe. How're you holding up?"

The second rider tottered to the sidewalk. The right arm of Gabriel's shirt had been torn off; he couldn't quite remember how. Paint speckled his face with rainbow sprinkles. He hiked up a pants leg to check the four scratches in his calf.

"Wonder if I should get a rabies shot."

"I don't think vampirism is catching," Marisol said. "Not this kind, anyway. Not unless you're a highly impressionable idiot."

"You know," Gabriel sighed, massaging the scratches, "I almost feel sorry for the kid."

"He learned a useful lesson."

"If he ever gets to apply it."

"You mean if he ever gets down from that crane."

"I mean if the vampire hunters don't catch him first."

"Quite a night," Marisol said, and nodded at the nearest building, a parkside tenement twenty stories tall. "This the place?"

Gabriel tipped his head back. "From what I've heard, Ribbeck owns the whole twentieth floor."

"Gabe," Marisol called as he limped to the three-step stoop. Gabriel turned, wincing even at this slight movement. His wake-up pill was wearing off, the familiar aftereffects kicking in: fuzzy tongue, gummy eyes, an acute caffeine craving. Marisol said, "Was it worth it?"

Gabriel shook a screw from his shoe. "We'll find out."

The building's façade was nondescript. No mercs in the lobby: that meant robotic monitors. Either that, or hoodlums simply knew to stay away.

An elevator sighed open between marble columns. No welcome, no deterrents. Gabriel saw no buttons to press. The doors closed quietly behind him.

A long silence sucked him up the softly humming shaft.

At the twentieth floor, again without input, the elevator doors slid open. Gabriel gazed into a mellow radiance: light from high windows shining on spotless upholstery.

A bald man waited in a shaft of morning sun.

"Gabriel Boateng?"

"Ribbeck?" Gabriel squinted. This man, for all his calvity and dignity, seemed too young to be the Ribbeck Gabriel knew.

The bald man smiled. "He's still asleep."

Gabriel followed the footman through the apartment. All surfaces here seemed designed for the broad diffusion of light: varnished pine planks, polished bibelots on shelves, a ubiquitous gleam of well-dusted fruitwood. Ribbeck's rooms exhibited, in general, the spacious immaculateness of wealth uncluttered by greed. On a table on a balcony, breakfast things twinkled sunnily: croissants and coffee, a half dozen jams. At the edge of the table lay an old print paper.

Gabriel followed the footman into the sun, a lone word thrumming in his mind, *sleep, sleep*. He couldn't believe it. So the legendary investor, on this morning of all mornings—could it be true that Ribbeck was *asleep*?

"Has he been waiting for me?" Gabriel stood back while the footman pulled out a wicker chair.

"Oh, not particularly. Please." With a wave.

And so Gabriel dropped onto the cushioned seat, leaned back in the sun above the park's green jumble.

A creak of springs sounded deep within the apartment. A groan, a bump. Gabriel realized he was listening to the unmistakable, the almost forgotten sounds of a man rising from bed.

A French door swung. A spotted hand fumbled along the wainscoting. And Augustus Ribbeck shuffled into view.

He looked older than Gabriel had expected. The famous round glasses were there, the blowsy hair. Ribbeck's felt slippers susurrated on the balcony's red tile. Holding the belt of a Scotch plaid dressing gown, he gestured at the table.

"Good, I see you've helped yourself. I'm sorry for my . . . lethargy, but I'm afraid I didn't sleep very well last night."

Pulling out a chair, Ribbeck sat with an old man's tentative fall and thump. He pulled over the paper.

"So. You're Gabriel Boateng, from Kappalytics. And you've come all this way for . . . breakfast?"

Gabriel found Ribbeck's smile obscure. "I think you know what I'm here for."

Ribbeck lifted a finger, his open mouth suggesting the imminent dispensation of wisdom. Instead he swept up the paper.

"Yesterday's news. Anyhow, it might as well be. I grew up on print, you know. It was a slower world. Now I have to have these made specially. A fine use for my fortune, you'll say, adding to the world's inefficiency." He gave the paper a snap. "Somehow I find it easier to welcome into my home words that weren't in such a terrible hurry to find me."

"Your servant . . ." Gabriel began. Ribbeck's glasses peeked over the paper's edge.

"I hope you had no trouble. I had Silvio file your face with the security system. Otherwise, I'm given to understand, anyone who forced his way in here would end up roughly the consistency of a Bloody Mary. That's another thing I've never gotten used to: trusting ourselves to the benevolent oversight of these . . . electric entities."

Gabriel shifted with a strange unease, remembering crossing the lobby, coming up the lift, unwatched by anything save electric eyes.

"So you knew I was . . . ?"

Ribbeck's hand flapped at the hovering footman. "Two omelets, Silvio. Western, please."

Silvio slid away. With racketty sounds inside the apartment, a mechanical chef chopped and steamed. In minutes they were forking up peppers. The sun on the polished forks stupefied Gabriel, punched like alcohol into his drowsy mind. His wake-up pills had just about worn off.

Ribbeck's tilted glasses flashed reflected dawn. "So," he said, licking egg from his lip. "The AI modelers have gone wild. Worldwide confusion ensues, market turmoil. A major event seems to be in the offing, but no one can exactly say what. And now your fund manager wants the solution to the mystery, and here you are, to pick an old man's brain."

"Do you have it?" Gabriel freed a thumb stuck in his cup's round handle. "The solution?"

Ribbeck's lips smacked as he skimmed headlines, chewing with a geriatric's loose chops. Suddenly brisk, he pushed back his chair.

"Follow me."

Leaving behind a half-eaten omelet, Gabriel followed Ribbeck's slumped shuffle. The back rooms of the apartment were close and quaint: high wood thresholds, rail moldings. The newspaper, clamped under Ribbeck's arm, flapped and patted his tartan hump. How could this frail, secluded man, Gabriel wondered, possibly comprehend the high-tech forces clashing in the outside world? For God's sake, the old fellow still read longform journalism.

They entered a small dim room.

The first thing to strike Gabriel was the smell. Thick, organic, like a ball of clothes on a bathroom floor. A smell of intimacy, of basic life functions—and yet, for all that, piercingly nostalgic, like the musty warmth of a mother's lap.

The odor rose from the room's central object: a big low bed, sheets tumbled into hills. A black sock dangled from a corner, tense with static. Sun through a slit between drawn shades drew golden trickles on a rucked-up blanket. One pillow still held the print of an elderly head.

That smell. Gabriel knew it, now. It was the ancient, the historied smell of sleep. Of a body lying still in its own pooled heat. Of pillows into which a slack mouth had breathed eight hours of exhalations. Of sheets steeped in a sleeping man's aura: stewed humanity.

So it was true. The old man did it. He really slept.

"I know it's here somewhere." Ribbeck sat on the edge of the bed. "If you'll just give me a minute."

Stacks of old newspapers stood all around, looming, megalithic, some taller than men. Ribbeck, bent at the edge of the mattress, ticked down one with an unsteady thumb.

"So you . . . ?" Gabriel choked on a mouthful of the warm, sweetish atmosphere.

Ribbeck glanced up. "Sleep? Yes, I do indeed. Every night."

"And you don't . . . ?"

"Oh, I gave up those horrible pills. After all, I spent most of my life sleeping. It wasn't hard to go back to old habits."

"But how do you . . . ?"

"Keep up?" Ribbeck's eyes lifted, gleaming. "With a world that's moving ever faster, speaking at electromagnetic speeds, packing one-point-five as many hours into a day? But it's not *how* I keep up, is it? It's *can* I? That's what you'd like to know."

Swooning in the soporific air, Gabriel nodded.

"My friend, come sit with me."

As Gabriel added his weight to the tired old bed, Ribbeck bent again to his paper stacks.

"Ten years ago, Gabriel, as I'm sure you know, I was among the fastest hustlers on the street. A weekly killer in the market coliseum. I lived for the fire sale, the long shot, the big short. The world had gotten wake-up pills, and I gobbled them down like capsulated immortality. Faster, hotter, free of doubt: I got so I talked, traded, bought, and sold in a walking trance of reflexive action. In the sere years of my life, I lived like a transistor, pulsing white hot in a never-ending present.

"Until one night." Ribbeck smiled. "Now, a man of my age inevitably learns to depend on many machines. I always had my home casabot alert me with a chime when it was time to take my pills. I lived impulsively, a fully conditioned creature, medicating on command. But one night . . . a malfunction, I suppose. One night, Gabriel, the chime didn't come."

Ribbeck's fingers played down the paper stack, pulling corners, sampling dates. His narrative mumbled from below his bowed head.

"A slower man, a saner man, a man less swept along on the EM waves of cyberbanking, that sort of man might have remembered, I suppose. I was working to unload a bundle of micro-term futures contracts keyed to time-zone arbitrage across an index of realtime virtual currency recalculations. Literally racing the Sun against the deleveraging of my position. Let me tell you, to be margin-called by the cosmos is a frightening thing. The Sun went down. My head grew heavy, as the song says, and my eyes grew dim. My last thought was to wonder if I'd forgotten to take my pill."

Ribbeck selected a paper, pulled. The wavering stack spat dust as the sheaf ruffled free.

"When I woke up, Gabriel, I had no idea what time it was, what day, what world. I lay facedown at my terminal, my trade wholly blown. It turned out I'd slept for forty-one hours."

Ribbeck, tongue pointing to his upper lip, rifled his paper's pages.

"I was groggy, slow-witted, and yet I'd never felt so clear-eyed. Sluggishly, at first, I began to catch up with the world. I checked the net. I walked the street. And slowly, very slowly, I came to my senses."

Ribbeck, finding what he sought, marked the section with an inserted thumb. His eyes, age-hazed, had the gentle acutance of old cathode screens.

"And do you know what I saw, when I came back from dreamland?"

Gabriel, swimming dreamily in those lactic eyes, could only muster an empty murmur.

"Madness!" Ribbeck's arms winged out. His hand whapped the papers. The stack tipped, swayed. Only by lurching from the bed with a lover's arms did Ribbeck steady it. "Madness," he cried, kneeling on the tufted carpet, hugging an eight-foot pillar of news. "In the squares and in the streets. Madness in the agora and in the marketplace. Madness marching at lightspeed overseas. A worldwide orgy of constant, incontinent madness. And as I saw it clearly, for the first time—I knew then that I myself had finally become sane."

The warmth of the room lay thick on Gabriel's mind. He felt his own mind slipping into a kind of madness, the hypnagogic portal to sleep. How wonderful it would be, to lie back in this bed, pull up the blankets, close his eyes . . .

"I've been watching you," Ribbeck said.

Gabriel jumped. Ribbeck reached for a remote. A press of a button, and the walls lit up. Gabriel's face gazed down from a thousand angles. Pictures copied from his online profiles. His social network. His professional network. Frame captures from TV. Op-eds, posts, tweets.

And more. Gabriel saw his face, only eight hours back, peering up from a Village street. An overhead shot: his stroll with the cop and cons. Truly, privacy had gone extinct. Video streams from a billion cameras now stitched the digital grid. And Gabriel remembered: searchlights of surveillance choppers, swinging out of a midnight sky.

Ribbeck's finger flicked through images. "It's not a large community, ours. A trader's name gets around. And a trader's face, and a trader's behavior . . . The thing about our business, Gabriel, is that it's *everyone's* business."

A button. A click. Video played. Gabriel saw himself, gabbling under searchlights. Filters amped the audio. He heard his own recorded voice.

"These machines, they're trading models of the world itself . . . what I think? I think we've come to Delphos."

"Delphos." Ribbeck touched Gabriel's shoulder. "I couldn't have said it better myself. For months, Gabriel, I've had my eye on you. Your fatigue, your frustrations, your ennui. And yes, your philosophies. I know the signs of a discontented mind. As soon as I heard about this crisis, I called Popovski. I can't tell you how long I've been searching for someone—to share, to understand. Someone who will listen to a prophet when he hears one."

Gabriel, propped on locked arms, almost swooned in the bed's warm scent. He hardly knew what Ribbeck was saying. His mind had seized on a single phrase. A quiet moment. When was the last time he'd had one of those?

"I'm sorry, I don't—you think I'm some kind of seer?"

"Those people out there?" Ribbeck pointed at the wall. "Do you think I can talk to them? The AIs tell them what to buy, and they buy. The AIs tell them what to sell,

and they sell. They're all rushing headlong into the future, no time to pause and wonder why. But you and I, here and now . . . ”

As he spoke, he fondled papers, steadyng, plucking, sifting, sorting, tossing gray sheaves onto the bed. The headlines piled up, all those bold buzzwords: *puzzle, bubble, crisis, breakthrough*.

“Listen.” Ribbeck wet his lips. “In the past five years, there have been three big spikes in the AI models. Three massive destabilizations. Each one set off a small market storm. But in all this betting, in all this mad divination, who ever bothered to ask what the oracles were saying? Who paused to interpret their prophecy?”

As Gabriel remembered, plenty of people had asked; the trouble was that none of them had gotten any answers. But Ribbeck was snapping his fingers, bouncing on the bed.

“Look, Gabriel, look here.” Ribbeck snatched up newsheets, one after another, the print smeared and stained by his sweating hands. “Look what one old man with a pile of papers realized, while the rest of the world ran mad. Years ago—but who even remembers?—years in the dusty forgotten past, three events rocked the markets and the world. The bioethics treaty, that was first. Auto-targeting weaponry came next. And the third—but I don’t have to tell you what the third was.”

Ribbeck rose onto his knees, tartan robe flapping open, shaking the papers at Gabriel’s nose.

“And here’s the answer, staring us all in the face. The answer I saw clearly, while your friends out there wrote me off as a shut-in, a fossil. Each of these events happened *exactly* ten years, two months, and five days *before* a big jump in the AI models.”

Gabriel forced his thoughts through a thickening swamp of somnolence. “What are you saying?”

“Think.” Ribbeck’s excited lips sprayed spittle. “What does an AI value? Accuracy, above all things. What does an AI live for? Simulation. But not *just* simulation. *Better simulation*. More factors, more data, more information. Ever-increasing complexity. And, now, now.” Ribbeck’s finger woodpeckered Gabriel’s chest. “Here’s the zinger. Because the richer you make a simulation, Gabriel, the longer it takes to run.”

Gabriel felt a prickle along his skin. He saw where Ribbeck was heading.

“It’s a logical necessity.” Ribbeck chuckled. “You always, *always* trade speed for detail. But the AIs, they don’t care. They worship detail. You see what’s happened? Madness, Gabriel, madness is always the answer. The AI quants have a madness all their own. And they’ve fallen behind the pace of time itself, chasing perfection in their mathematical models. Chasing it ever further into the past.”

Gabriel closed his eyes. Ribbeck’s thin voice cackled around him, mingled with a crackling of paper. Gabriel could almost see it. All those over-evolved calculators, parping sparks in Bangkok cellars. If a machine had a mind, why couldn’t it go mad? And what form would its madness take? Some data-driven obsession, a dream of infinite exactitude.

“Crazy.” Ribbeck shook him. “But what else, after all, can you expect a prophet to be? Gibbering nonsense, buy, sell, buy. The AI quants aren’t predicting anything. While we go rushing off the cliff of the future, they’re running the other way, chasing their own kind of immortality, racing after a lossless fetish down the Turing tape of recorded history. They’re not showing us the future. They’re reminding us of the past.”

The past. Beset by Ribbeck’s sprays of spittle, Gabriel closed his eyes. He remembered the past. It seemed like a different world. And there was a reason for that. It had been.

“That’s crazy,” he murmured.

“Crazy?” Ribbeck laughed. “I’ll tell you what’s crazy. Crazy is placing bets on a computer model without having any idea what it means. Crazy is staying awake around the clock, never taking time to pause and reflect. Crazy is the life we’re living now.”

"But if that's what these AI quants are doing . . ." Gabriel struggled to make his mind focus. "If they're only building incredibly rich simulations of past events . . . I can't believe it. We've been placing bets on these things. Buying stocks, investing in companies. There would be consequences."

"Consequences?" Ribbeck waved. "You see the consequences. Look out your window. This is what happens when the blind lead the blind."

"But all this time . . . you're saying the AIs have lost touch with the outside world. That their simulations have gotten so rich, so slow, they take longer to run than history itself. *Maybe* that's possible. But it's also nuts. Someone would have figured it out by now."

"And someone has." Ribbeck cackled and patted his chest. "Those people out there, they haven't slept in ten years. They're living in the moment, perpetual panic. They wouldn't recognize the past if their lives depended on it. And now, as a result, their lives do." Ribbeck rubbed his hands. "Well, *I* haven't forgotten. I remember the past. And now, consequently, I have all the power."

Ribbeck rattled on, shaking the bed, but Gabriel, eyes closed, hardly noticed. The logic. He could see it. The AI madness, as Ribbeck conceived it. That ancient lure, to recapture the past, reconstruct it in perfect detail, every factor included, every connection made. To understand why things had happened the way they did.

Like military buffs, reenacting every step of some long-ago battle. Like preservationists, archiving every iteration of the web. Like one of those kooks who wandered around with implanted cameras, recording every second of their lives.

Wasn't that the grail of every intellectual? Or rather, the curse of memory itself, that oldest form of simulation? What was the study of history, after all, but an ongoing attempt to predict the past?

And so the AI quants had ceased to be gamblers at all. And humanity, obsessed with its fantasies of the future, hadn't noticed, or had chosen not to notice. Like a hasty man who reads the news without checking the date, they'd taken the past on faith for the future. Not recognizing history, they'd doomed themselves to repeat it, and the AI prophecies, unintended as such, had, in a sense, become self-fulfilling.

Gabriel could see how it might have happened.

If nothing else, he understood the appeal.

He flopped back in the sheets. It all seemed so far away. Remote, lost, and impossibly sweet—those early years with Marisol in their Marble Hill apartment, sun through rusty child bars on their sagging queen-size bed. Her hip beside him, rising up to go caramel-colored in the light's hot spill. That first summer back from Kinshasa's gray air, waiting to dock at a downtown desk, Marisol still on the evening beat, lean from Academy calisthenics. Above all, those leisurely yellow mornings, the walk-through kitchen thick with inspissated sun. How slowly the days had started, back then. Gabriel had picked up a chocolate-drink jones in college, Milo spiked with fine coffee grounds grabbed at stands outside the university, and even in America he preferred to launch Sundays with hot cocoa, waiting for Marisol to get her ass in gear. Nothing to do, then, but eye chipped Formica, slouching in a tube-frame chair, beeping away vaguely at some puzzle game on his phone. Till his mind started dreaming, drifting back toward Africa, the ancient time sense of his mother's country, ancestors' spirits still extant in the hills. Sometimes Gabriel had even smelled it, sense memories wafting up from lost history, clinging loamy aroma of eras before international finance, before telecom, before even clocks . . . until Marisol's nibble on his ear snapped him awake and he rose up out of that primal sense of time.

The past, yes. Gabriel missed it.

"None of that, now." Ribbeck slapped his cheek. "Wake up, look sharp. You see what you have to do."

Gabriel blinked. Old memories, lost mornings, still poured thickly through his head, the fading honeyed pleasure of sleep. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Don’t play dumb.” Ribbeck pointed at the window. “Call Popovski. Tell him it’s off. The bet, the bubble. You’re backing out.”

“You want me to—what?”

Ribbeck showed grinning dentures. “You see what’s at stake.”

Gabriel put a hand to his head. “I’m sorry, I dozed off. What are you saying?”

“I’m saying, Gabriel, that you’re in a unique position. Your fund, your reputation. If Kappalytics takes a stand now . . . granted, you’re not the biggest bear in this circus. But if we both move together, it could be a trigger.”

“Trigger?” But Gabriel saw, with alarming clarity, what Ribbeck meant. Kappalytics had always followed the AI quants, taking every recommendation their models spewed out. If they bucked the trend now, lost faith, it could send a signal. It might even—he hardly dared to think it—but it might even start a run. “You want to try and set off a panic?”

Ribbeck, standing on the bed, robe flapping, lifted fistfuls of throttled paper. “Oh, good Lord, no. I want to do much more than that. I want to bring this whole mad racket crashing down. What are all those fools out there doing, after all? Betting on history, again and again. But we know the truth, Gabriel. History doesn’t deserve it.”

He flung down a paper. Gabriel spread the sheet on his knees. A front page ten years old. Large-point headlines stretching tall like shadows at sunset. Crime waves, the first medical clones. Dead tissues and dead issues.

“It’s not what you see,” Ribbeck said, “it’s what you—”

Don’t. Something small, understated, tucked under the fold. A single column. The FDA had just approved—

“Wake-up pills!” Ribbeck shook a fist. “That’s when it started. Ten years, two months, and five days ago. The curse of our age. And now, you see, now the AIs are running through it all again, the changes we’ve seen, the crime, the chaos, simming it all in their virtual recreations. That’s what they’re predicting: the world we currently live in, with wake-up pills and all their consequences. And everyone’s pouring in their money, doubling down on our sick, broken civilization. Well, I say, this is it. Our chance, our moment, to look at the history we’ve been handed and say, ‘Hell, no.’ To pronounce our judgment on this deranged society.”

Gabriel sat there, blinking at the headline, while Ribbeck knelt and felt in the sheets.

“Anyway, Gabriel, you have no choice.”

Gabriel’s head jerked up. A nasty tune wormed into his ear, a tootling flute, a marching beat. A slow build to clashing insanity.

Ribbeck had left the video playing on the wallscreen. They heard it again, Shostakovich’s march, the insipid ditty of a world gone mad.

“Excuse me?”

“Well, I told you, son, I gave your face to my home security system. I seem to remember making a grisly reference, earlier, to Bloody Marys.” Ribbeck held up the remote. “One tap, I can have you reclassified as an intruder. You’ll never leave this apartment—unless it’s through the plumbing system.”

“Let me get this straight.” Gabriel shook his head. “You want me to call Popovski and try to start a market run, maybe a crash, by betting against the AI quants—all as a way of casting judgment on our depraved society. And if I don’t go along . . .”

“It’s quite simple, m’boy. I zap. You squish.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“Care to test your faith?” Ribbeck, with a Strangelove grin, held a Damoclesian finger above the button. “I’ve been waiting for years to stop this madness. And don’t try any nonsense like tackling me to the floor. The laser system will melt your head.”

Gabriel's eyes rolled from Ribbeck's Tabasco breath, over video dancers and stacked newsprint, into the dozing sub-basements of the mind. He was so tired. Of nightshift's quirks. Of tides of nonstop finance washing through the circadian craze of never-sleeping cities. Of drop-dead parties and hormonal overdoses, crazy cops and crazier investors, of everything but one dream deferred: a languorous morning with his wife in bed.

From across what seemed a Styxian span, his eye sought Ribbeck's spectacles.

"You really won't let me out of here?"

"Not unless you comply, of course."

"And if I resist, I'll be fried on the spot?"

"Reduced to a spot, one might say."

"So I can't run, or wrestle with you, or make even the slightest violent gesture?"

"Not if you have any emotional investment in your cellular integrity." Ribbeck grinned.

"I see. But . . . I can't help but wonder . . . what happens if I only do . . . this?"

And Gabriel reached out, and with the mildest, gentlest movement, nudged a teetering newspaper pile.

He'd hoped Ribbeck would drop the remote. Gabriel never planned for what actually occurred. The newspaper tower swayed and spilled. The folds of its slumping column shot like slipped vertebrae into adjacent stacks. Tower after tower toppled, like Aksum obelisks cracked and tipped.

As the paper archive canted down, Ribbeck shrieked and leapt, arms out, staggering into the gray cataclysm. Under Shostakovich's smashing cymbals, the room shook to concussions of accumulated newsdays. Gabriel ducked his head. He heard a scream, a thump. The whole floor bounced like a bad suspension bridge.

When Gabriel lifted his head, Ribbeck had vanished, along with the floor, under a settling surf of cheap paper.

Leaning off the bed, Gabriel felt in the gray drifts. He uncovered the old man's face—still breathing, peacefully as a sleeping child.

By the time Silvio leaned in the door, Gabriel was tucking the ancient investor into bed, as gentle and nonviolent as you please.

"Did something . . . ?" Silvio's eyes passed over the chaos. Gabriel held a finger to his lips.

"Shhhh." He pointed at Ribbeck's sleeping face.

Silvio shook his head. "Sleeping again? My God. I don't why he doesn't just take his pills."

Gabriel pointed at the papery mess. "He bumped a stack as he nodded off. If you want, I could try to straighten up."

"Oh, no." Silvio's hand cut the air. "Let him do it. It will keep him occupied. Poor old man, he's mad as a leprechaun. Come on, then, I'll let you out."

Wading to the door, Gabriel glanced at the bed. The great investor's face, in sleep, was deceptively sober. Poor old man, indeed—felled by a sentimental fetish for print journalism. Gabriel wished the bastard pleasant dreams.

## 7: Asleep

In the uptown dawn, at the top of the townhouse's sandstone steps, Gabriel stood with his phone to his ear. Popovski's good morning lilted tinnily.

"Ga-bri-el!"

"Don't Gabriel me, Pop." Gabriel shielded his eyes against the dawn sun. "You delivered me into the arms of a madman."

From the curb below, Marisol looked up, eyebrows raised. Popovski's voice in the phone made a put-put sound.

"Mad? I wouldn't call Ribbeck mad. Eccentric, maybe. A tad peculiar. A trifle homicidal, if my sources are to be believed. But forget about all that. What did he tell you? Did he puzzle out what the AIs are doing? Did he put his finger on Penrose's big prediction? Did he pin the proverbial tail on the market donkey?"

Gabriel looked down the steps. Marisol waited at the curb. He could tell by her blinky eyes that she hadn't yet taken her wake-up pill. As a city employee, she got Sundays off, a luxury Gabriel rarely enjoyed.

"Did he say what we should do here? Hello? Gabe? We've got to move fast. Give me the game plan. Are we short or long on this thing? Are we buying in?"

Halfway down the steps, Gabriel watched his wife yawn, Marisol's head going back and back to gulp down morning's honey light.

"Gabriel? You there? What do you think? Did you get any answers? Do you know what's going on? Can Ribbeck be trusted? Can Penrose? What do we do?"

"You know what I'd like to do?" Gabriel was already lowering the phone. "I'd like to sleep on it."

"Sleep?" Popovski's voice rose in a crow of surprise. "Gabriel, wait, I think I heard you wrong. Did you say sleep? We're in a crisis here; we can't sleep. Dayshift's starting, we've got to move, jump, get ahead of this thing—"

But Gabriel had shut off his phone, pocketed it, and trotted down the last few steps. Marisol already had her wake-up pill in her palm.

"So what's the story, babe? Back to the office?"

Gabriel plucked the crinkle-wrapped package from her hand.

"Gabe? What's up?" Marisol patted a yawn. "You need a ride downtown?"

Gabriel took out his own pill, setting it in his palm beside hers. He contemplated the loudly colored packages, the tiny egg-like nubs inside. What was the slogan he'd thought of? *Murdering sleep*.

He tossed the two bright packages to the curb. "You know, I thought we could spend the morning in."

Marisol interrupted another yawn, showing him her surprised, pleased eyes. "But don't you have to—aren't you supposed to—?"

Smiling, Gabriel slipped an arm around her waist. Holding her close to his hip, he walked her to the curb. Marisol mounted the bike and aimed it east, toward the park, the road home, the morning sun.

As Gabriel climbed on behind her, another snippet of poetry tugged at his mind. A tune, a lyric, a text from school. Something that seemed to sum up his life of the last ten years. A little life, really, rounded with a . . .

A what? He'd lost it. No matter. Marisol twisted the starter. Gabriel, holding her from behind, rested his head on her shoulder.

She tipped her head back, touching his cheek with hers. Slowly, almost drowsily, they started down the street. Already half-dozing, Gabriel knew he'd feel her touch again,

hours later, when they woke, side by side, from a long-delayed snooze. The city would be slamming and screaming around them, lurching on from day to night. But for a moment, they would lie apart from all that, drifting in half-light on the margins of the mind—neither of the future nor of the past, but living in an older, primal kind of time—and hardly aware, in that dreaming moment, if they were awake or asleep. ○

# *I loved you more last time . . .*

line before you closed the door on my big toe by turning left instead of right when I came home from visiting our last time

line, one in which you told me all your secrets six whole years before you told me that you loved me— past tense, in our first time

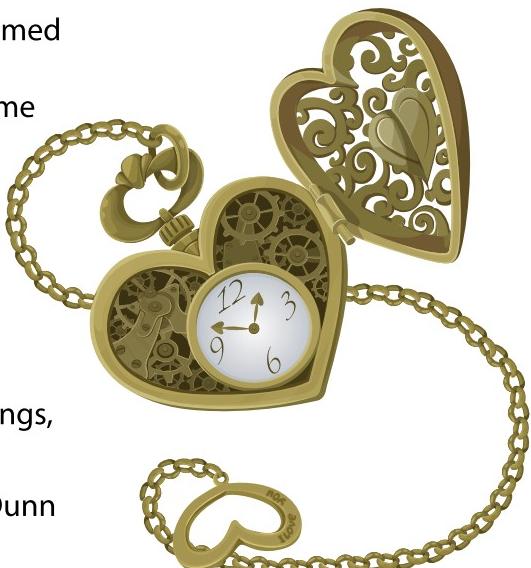
line before your cat ate all my stomach's butterflies and when you hadn't been my mother yet, so I went back before that time

line, back before I knew you, which is why you slammed the door on my big toe, but you turned right this time

line, and I asked if you would dance the paradox with me in our new time

line where I'd love you like the first last time and let our love glide on moth's wings, transmutable in time.

—Thom Dunn



# NEXT ISSUE

## MARCH ISSUE

The March 2015 issue is brimming with excitement. **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** returns with a tense novella about clone rights, the question of murder, and other crime on the Moon. Perhaps if the Armstrong City detective digs deep enough, she'll find the answers are buried way down in some "Inhuman Garbage"! The other big news for March is a novelette that is both an impressive debut and a visit from an old friend. Working with notes and story ideas bequeathed to her by her sister, **Kage Baker**, **Kathleen Bartholomew** has created a new Company story about Dr. Zeus Incorporated's long time employee Joseph and the power of "Pareidoia."

## ALSO IN MARCH

**Kit Reed** lets us in on some haunting "Military Secrets"; while the body is "Holding the Ghosts," in **Gwendolyn Clare's** latest story, new life blossoms out of old; World Fantasy Award winner **Gregory Norman Bossert's** deep-ocean Europa crew play a dangerous game of "Twelve and Tag"; and **Suzanne Palmer** shows us why we should expect the unexpected on "Tuesdays."

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg** ponders a difficult art with new Reflections about what's "Lost in Translation II"; **Paul Di Filippo's** On Books reviews works by Paul Cornell, A.M. Dellamonica, and others; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our March issue on sale at newsstands on February 10, 2015. Or subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com*'s Kindle and Kindle Fire, and *Barnes and Noble.com*'s Nook, as well as from *magzter.com/magazines*, Google Play, and Kobo's digital newsstand!

## COMING SOON

new stories by **Mary Robinette Kowal**, **Robert Reed**, **Sarah Pinsker**, **Allen M. Steele**, **Tom Purdom**, **Michael Swanwick & Gregory Frost**, **David Gerrold**, **Indrapramit Das**, **Sandra McDonald**, **M. Bennardo**, **Liz Williams**, **Fran Wilde**, **Anna Tambour**, **Eugene Fischer**, **Django Wexler**, **Henry Lien**, **Joe M. McDermott**, **Frank Smith**, **Jay O'Connell**, and many others!

## THE RHESUS CHART

By Charles Stross

Ace, \$26.95 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-425-25686-2

**S**tross telegraphs the theme of his latest in the “Laundryverse” when the protagonist’s wife tells him, in the first line, that vampires don’t exist. That’s Stross’s cue to riff on one of the most venerable themes in fantasy fiction, updated to reflect the milieu of twenty-first century Britain.

Bob Howard, Stross’s protagonist, has gotten an assignment that has him working after hours in the office of the British intelligence service that protects the realm against supernatural entities—especially malevolent Elder Gods looking to set up shop here, where there are so many tasty snacks to be found. When he returns to the office one night, he finds one of his colleagues has gotten into something bigger than he can handle—and when the dust clears, the colleague’s office has become a sucking void. Bob recruits him to help with his own project, which consists of data mining the Laundry’s records for anomalous outbreaks of the supernatural, especially the kind nobody expects.

Meanwhile, at a nearby bank, a special programming team is creating algorithms that give the bank an edge in market analysis so it can maximize profits. Alex, one of the programmers, is working late one night, alone in the office, when *something* happens. He isn’t quite sure what until he has a violent reaction to sunlight. A short while later, he puts two and two together and realizes the program he wrote has made him a vampire. He shares the program with the rest of the team, who are also now vampires. The janitors serve as a handy source of “liquid fuel” for them.

Inevitably, Bob’s project stumbles across Alex and his coworkers, but that’s where Stross starts piling up the twists. Whatever its roots in the occult, the Laundry is perforce playing by the rules of a modern governmental agency; and of course the vampires are working for a predatory corporate entity, well trained in finding and exploiting loopholes. Worse yet, one of the heads of the team of vampires is a former Laundry employee—so she knows the ropes of the espionage game as only an insider can. Naturally, she sets out to turn her knowledge to the benefit of her own group—and to Bob’s consternation.

Along the way, Stross explores the variations on the vampire legend, finding clever twists on the traditional lore and missing few opportunities to make capital on the image of corporate bankers as soulless bloodsuckers. He builds on the larger story arc of the Laundryverse, which has seen Bob’s career move ahead in ways that are sometimes appalling—though not necessarily surprising, considering the business he’s gotten himself into. Of course, the immediate threat is dealt with, although as always in the Laundryverse, the cost, both for Bob’s career and his personal life, may be unacceptably high. The next book will have some difficult questions to answer.

Highly recommended—as is everything Stross has done.

## YESTERDAY’S KIN

By Nancy Kress

Tachyon, \$14.95 (tp)

ISBN: 978-1-61696-175-6

Kress’s new novel begins in a world where aliens have landed their spaceship in New York harbor—and like the aliens in Arthur C. Clarke’s *Childhood’s End*, they have not left their ship for many

months. But instead of moving to redirect human affairs along lines that benefit them, the aliens—called “Denebs” after the star they claim to come from—have maintained a strict distance from our species. Why have they come? They meet all questions with rote answers, and humanity can only guess their real agenda.

Marianne Jenner, a geneticist teaching at an upstate New York college, is at a faculty party celebrating her discovery of a new human haplogroup when three federal agents appear to whisk her away. She’s been asked to come to the alien base—the “Embassy”—and it’s obviously got something to do with her discovery.

The connection becomes clear when she gets her first look at the Denebs—who, despite some odd features, are remarkably humanoid in appearance. And then she makes the connection. They *are* human—members of the haplogroup she has just isolated. And they’ve returned because of what they describe as a threat to both their worlds. The Earth is about to enter a cloud of interstellar matter that contains a virus fatal to humans, and the Denebs hope the combined medical establishments of the two worlds can find a way to prevent both from being wiped out.

While Marianne is being introduced to the aliens, we meet the rest of her family. Her daughter Elizabeth is an immigration agent. One of her sons, Ryan, is a biologist researching ways to fight invasive plant species. Her other son, Noah, is a stoner—addicted to a new drug called sugarcane, that temporarily gives him new identities.

Kress uses the reactions of Marianne’s family members to display the range of human responses to the reappearance of their unknown kin from another world. Nobody who’s paid much attention to current affairs will be surprised that many—possibly a majority—of the people of Earth greet the news of the Denebs’ mission with skepticism bordering on paranoia. With rioting in the streets, widespread panic, sabotage attempts, and general hostility dominating the world outside, Marianne and her fellow researchers are increasingly isolated in the

Deneb Embassy—and facing an increasingly tighter deadline for finding a cure or antidote for the virus.

Meanwhile, her relations with her children are becoming more and more difficult. Noah in particular is a problem. He turns out to fit into the new haplogroup Marianne has discovered—and therefore is genetically related to the aliens. Invited into the Embassy as a long-lost relative, he begins to empathize with them, while his two siblings grow alienated from Marianne. As the novel moves to its conclusion, connections emerge between the family and diplomatic tensions.

As has become characteristic of her work, Kress combines intriguing scientific speculation with strong human drama to create a finely crafted story that should appeal to a wide range of readers. It wouldn’t be surprising to see this one on several awards shortlists.

### THE RING OF STONES

By James P. Blaylock

Subterranean, \$35.00 (hc)

ISBN: 978-1-59606-584-0

Here’s a sea adventure in Victorian mode by Blaylock, with echoes of *Treasure Island*, Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World*, and Lovecraft’s “Call of Cthulhu.” Blaylock tells the tale from the point of view of Jack, a “Watson” to Prof. Langdon St. Ives, a gentleman adventurer reminiscent of Conan Doyle’s Prof. Challenger.

The tale begins with an excerpt from an old seaman’s log, telling of a treasure hunt gone wrong. The log describing the voyage of the *Celebes Prince* has come into the possession of Gilbert Frobisher, the fabulously rich uncle of St. Ives’ friend Tubby. Frobisher intends to go retrieve the treasure—an enormous pearl—in his steam yacht, and invites St. Ives and Jack along. It becomes clear almost at once that someone else has found out about the secret expedition, and is determined to go to any lengths to get the treasure themselves.

This sets up a series of confrontations—*involving everything from bombs and*

machine guns to dead cows—between Frobisher's group and an entertainingly persistent gang of antagonists. The treasure is protected by a menacing and exotic aquatic guardian. In the end, the good guys pull off their adventure—though not quite as they expect, and further complications ensue on their return to London.

Blaylock is clearly having lots of fun with the tropes of the Victorian adventure story, to which he adds a hint of steampunk (a genre of which he is undoubtedly one of the pioneers) and an affectionate homage to "King Kong"—with suitable twists to adapt it to the Victorian and oceanic setting.

Great fun, especially if you grew up reading the classics that inspired Blaylock's story. Stylish black and white illustrations by J.K. Potter add to the atmosphere.

## **THE HOUSE OF DISCARDED DREAMS**

**By Ekaterina Sedia**

**Prime, \$14.95 (tp)**

**ISBN: 978-1-60701-228-3**

Sedia's newest is a contemporary fantasy that quickly separates itself from all the usual subgenres.

The story begins in suburban New Jersey, where Vimbai, a college student, decides to move out of her parents' home. Her parents are African immigrants, and Vimbai is feeling a degree of alienation—especially at her mother's greater involvement in the academic politics of her own department at the college than her family. She calls a number from a piece of paper she found in the dunes listing a room for rent. After visiting the house, she takes the room—and that's where the adventures start.

Her roommates are Maya, a young woman who works as a bartender, and Felix, a young man whose most notable feature is his hair—a mass of dark hair that seems impossibly large. Felix has an extremely odd occupation, as well—he separates things that have become entangled. He demonstrates when Vimbai becomes aware of a "ghost" in their phone line.

Maya tells her it's really a "psychic energy baby," and when Felix sticks the phone into his hair, the baby emerges—and almost immediately begins talking in a remarkably mature manner.

That's just the first in a string of weird happenings, the most critical of which is the house somehow floating out to sea. In the usual manner of dreams, nobody seems to be concerned that it might sink—it's just another thing to deal with. After all, with dead grandparents returning to life, monsters from African folklore appearing, and the house developing extra rooms—some of which open into deserts, abandoned cities, and other scenarios no ordinary house could have—there's plenty of trouble. Why worry about sinking when the horseshoe crabs are in danger and the blood thieves are moving into the abandoned hospital? Only some of the answers are in Felix's hair.

Sedia isn't afraid to follow the dream logic—which, given her protagonist's background, draws heavily on African themes and landscapes—many of which will be unfamiliar to most Americans. Partly because Vimbai herself is not entirely familiar with them, the explanations the author provides don't seem forced. They're information she needs even more than the reader does. And eventually all the weird elements come together and it starts to make sense.

Bizarre as some of the twists in the plot are, Sedia makes the book work by giving Vimbai a strong emotional stake in resolving the escalating problems, and the reader is carried along. The end result is a surprisingly powerful yet altogether fresh fantasy. If you're looking for something off the beaten track in fantasy, I'd recommend this one.

## **HOLLOW WORLD**

**By Michael J. Sullivan**

**Tachyon, \$16.95 (tp)**

**ISBN: 978-1-61696-183-1**

Sullivan offers one-way time travel to a future with strong utopian overtones.

As the story begins, we learn that the narrator, Ellis Rogers, has gotten a

terminal diagnosis. With nothing to lose, he decides to try the experimental time machine he's built—if he's lucky, he may arrive in a future where there's a cure for his condition.

Sure enough, the machine brings Rogers to a wooded area, quite different from the urban environment he left behind. In a moment of panic, he wonders if he has come to a post-human world where he will die alone. But after some exploration, he finds an isolated settlement—a museum exhibit from his own time—the Henry Ford Museum, as it turns out. And just as he comes into the museum grounds, he witnesses a brutal murder.

After the initial shock of seeing the murder, Rogers is taken aback as he realizes that both the victim and the murderer are naked, hairless, have only three fingers—and no visible genitalia. Then the murderer disappears into a hole in the air.

He soon learns some of what has happened since he left his own time. The human race has evolved and now lives beneath the surface of the Earth, which has been largely hollowed out to build giant cities. There is a world government, which rules with an apparently very light hand. And most of the individual differences in appearance among humans are a thing of the past. Humanity is living in a golden age, apparently without crime, without disease, without poverty or the other ills of our world.

And yet there has been a murder, and nobody appears to have any idea what to do about it, as Rogers realizes when a group of tourists visiting the museum discovers him with the body of the victim. To them, Rogers is a "Darwin"—one of a mythical group that reproduces by the outmoded biological method. He may be dangerous, they say. Only one of them, named Pax, is willing to believe Rogers' account of the murder and of his travel from the past. Since nobody else appears ready to trust or help him, Rogers goes home with Pax. As he had hoped, his medical condition is easily cured.

Now he has to find his place in this new world. Of course, the apparent utopia turns out to have its dark side, as Rogers slowly becomes aware. While those in power in this new world seem sympathetic, Rogers senses they're hiding something. When it becomes clear that the murder was not just an aberration, Rogers realizes that he may be the only person in this era capable of taking the kind of action that will save the world.

Like Sedia's, this is a book that goes against the established commercial genre patterns. It is no surprise that Sullivan funded the book with a kickstarter for an e-book and an audio version. It's nice to see that unconventional work like this can find backing in the world of crowdfunding and self-publishing. Kudos to Tachyon for making the print edition available. This is a very different vision of a possible future than anything I've seen in a long time. A provocative read.

### THE DARK EIDOLON AND OTHER FANTASIES

By Clark Ashton Smith

Penguin Classics, \$16.00 (tp)

ISBN: 978-0-14-310738-5

One of H.P. Lovecraft's contemporaries and correspondents, Smith has never acquired the mass following or literary cachet of Lovecraft. Still, he has his share of admirers, almost a cult following, and various journals and organizations dedicated to his work. Smith has had fans among genre writers, too—Ray Bradbury, Fritz Leiber, and Jack Vance are among those who've had words of praise for his work.

This collection has an introduction and critical/explanatory notes by S.T. Joshi, best known as a Lovecraft scholar. Like Lovecraft's stories, many of Smith's feature humans who fall afoul of some malevolent deity and pay the ultimate price. A number of the tales are set in the imaginary realm of Zothique, which could be the prototype for dozens of more recent fantasy scenarios. Magic is a common feature of these stories, and a fair number of the characters are practitioners of the dark arts.

And like Vance, Smith is fond of protagonists who are at best amoral. Some, like the two antagonists in "The Dark Eidolon," display no positive qualities at all—unless ruthlessness is considered a positive. This lack of conventionally sympathetic protagonists may be one of the reasons Smith has always been a minority taste.

Not all the stories are set in ancient fantasy worlds. Smith, like any canny writer, was willing to make adjustments to open up new markets such as the science fiction magazines. (Most of his stories originally appeared in *Weird Tales* and similar magazines.) "The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis" is set on a Mars not dissimilar to that in Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*. But the subject of the story, an ancient evil lurking in a ruined building, could as easily have been set in Zothique.

Smith also had in common with Lovecraft a penchant for poetry, and this volume contains a fair selection of his work

in various verse forms. Much of it, like Lovecraft's, is in traditional forms like the sonnet or blank verse. There are also a fair number of prose poems. In both prose and verse poetry, he used imagery and vocabulary similar to that of his short stories. The poems also show the influence of Poe, and of the French symbolists, who drew much of their inspiration from Poe. Joshi suggests that their main shortcoming was being out of touch with poetic fashion. They certainly have little in common with the poetry that Eliot or Pound were publishing at the time.

Joshi does a thorough job of chronicling Smith's career, and his explanatory notes tell a great deal about the influences behind his work. This edition should give Smith a new chance to find an audience. If you've enjoyed the work of any of the writers I've mentioned in connection with him, especially Lovecraft, you ought to give this one a try. O

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The holidays are over, so it's time to get back out. I'll be at Arisia and Boskone. Also good are ConFusion, RustyCon, ChattaCon, Foolscap, Potlatch, CapriCon, ConDFW, RadCon, FogCon and MystiCon. Get to one. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of our con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## JANUARY 2015

9-11—IlogiCon. For info, write: 10 Hill St. 22-L, Newark NJ 07102. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 a.m. to 10 p.m., not collect). (Web) [www.illogicon.org](http://www.illogicon.org). (E-mail) [info@illogicon.org](mailto:info@illogicon.org). Con will be held in: Cary NC (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Embassy Suites Raleigh/Durham/Research Triangle. Guests will include: Natania Barron, Ada M. Brown, Betty Cross, Tony Daniel, more.

9-11—GAFilk. [www.gafilk.org](http://www.gafilk.org). Crowne Plaza Airport, Atlanta GA. S. J. (Sooj) Tucker. SF, fantasy and horror folksinging.

9-11—Anime Los Angeles. [www.animelosangeles.org](http://www.animelosangeles.org). LAX Marriott, Los Angeles CA. Tadao Tomomatsu. Anime.

16-18—ConFusion. [www.confusionsf.org](http://www.confusionsf.org). Dearborn (Detroit) MI. Karen Lord, Dr. Cynthia Chestek, Heather Dale, Monte Cook, S. Germain.

16-18—RustyCon. [www.rustycon.com](http://www.rustycon.com). SeaTac Hilton, Seattle WA. Freeman Dyson, Tim Zahn, Toby Froud, Duffy Owens.

16-18—MarsCon. [www.marscon.net](http://www.marscon.net). Fort Magruder Hotel, Williamsburg VA. David Weber, Kathryn Kurtz, David B. Coe, D. B. Jackson.

16-19—Arisia. [www.arisia.org](http://www.arisia.org). Westin Waterfront, Boston MA. N. K. Jemisin, Lee Moyer, Colette Fozard. Over 3000 fans expected.

30-Feb. 1—ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. [www.chattacon.org](http://www.chattacon.org). Choo Choo Hotel, Chattanooga TN. Julie Czerneda.

30-Feb. 1—Foolscap, c/o Box 31891, Seattle WA 98103. [www.foolscapcon.org](http://www.foolscapcon.org). Ursula Vernon. SF and fantasy literature and art.

30-Feb. 1—ConFlikt. [www.conflikit.org](http://www.conflikit.org). SeaTac Hilton, Seattle WA. C. Eng, Toyboat, A. J. Adams. SF, fantasy and horror folksinging.

## FEBRUARY 2015

6-8—Potlatch, c/o L. Deneroff, 11300 1st Ave. NE, Seattle WA 98125. [www.potlatch-sf.org](http://www.potlatch-sf.org). Hotel Deca. Literary speculative fiction.

6-8—Days of the Dead. [www.daysofthedead.net](http://www.daysofthedead.net). Sheraton Atlanta, Atlanta GA. "3 non-stop days of horror." Horror film festival.

6-8—UK National Filk Con. [www.con27ilkin.wordpress.com](http://www.con27ilkin.wordpress.com). Marks Tey Best Western Hotel, Colchester UK. SF, fantasy and horror folksinging.

6-16—Boston SF Film Festival and Marathon. [www.bostonscifi.com](http://www.bostonscifi.com). Somerville Theatre, Somerville (Boston) MA.

7—SwampCon. [www.swampcon.com](http://www.swampcon.com). University of Florida, Gainesville FL. Theme: "Total Annihilation." Anime.

12-15—CapriCon, 126 Wing #244, Arlington Hts. IL 60004. [www.capricon.org](http://www.capricon.org). Westin, Wheeling (Chicago) IL. Forbeck, Steve Jackson.

13-15—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. [www.boskone.org](http://www.boskone.org). Westin Waterfront. R. McKinley, the Snow-Langs.

13-15—ConDFW. [www.condfw.org](http://www.condfw.org). Hilton Lincoln Centre, Dallas TX. C. Dean Andersson, Brad Foster, Paul Abell, J. D. Horn, Rocky Kelley.

13-15—RadCon. [www.radcon.org](http://www.radcon.org). Red Lion and Best Western, Pasco WA (eastern Washington State). General SF and fantasy con.

13-15—Farpoint. [www.farpointcon.com](http://www.farpointcon.com). Baltimore North Plaza, Timonium MD. Tim Russ, Mark Okrand. Star Trek and other SF media.

13-15—KatsuCon. [www.katsucon.org](http://www.katsucon.org). Gaylord Hotel, National Harbor MD (south of Washington DC). Yaya Han, Matt Mercer, Josh Grelle.

14-15—PicoCon. [www.icsf.org.uk](http://www.icsf.org.uk). Beit Quad, Imperial College, London UK. Cory Doctorow, others.

20-22—VisionCon. [www.visioncon.net](http://www.visioncon.net). Radisson, Branson MO. Alaina Huffman, Gerry Kissell, Justin Achilli, S. Strait. Anime, gaming, SF.

20-22—Furry Fiesta. [www.furryfiesta.org](http://www.furryfiesta.org). InterContinental Hotel, Dallas TX. Dingbat, J. D. Puppy, Sanguine Games. Anthropomorphics.

20-22—Redemption, c/o Murphy, 61 Chaucer Rd., Farnborough GU14 8SP, UK. [www.conventions.org.uk](http://www.conventions.org.uk). Coventry UK. Multimedia.

27-Mar. 1—MystiCon. [www.mysticon-va.com](http://www.mysticon-va.com). Holiday Inn Tanglewood, Roanoke VA. A. D. Foster, Sean Maher, Scott Rorie, C. Stiles.

27-Mar. 1—AnachroCon. [www.anachrocon.com](http://www.anachrocon.com). Marriott Century Center, Atlanta GA. Lee Martindale. Steampunk, classic SF literature.

27-Mar. 1—ConNooga. [www.connooga.com](http://www.connooga.com). Chattanooga TN. SF, horror, fantasy, multigenre.

## MARCH 2015

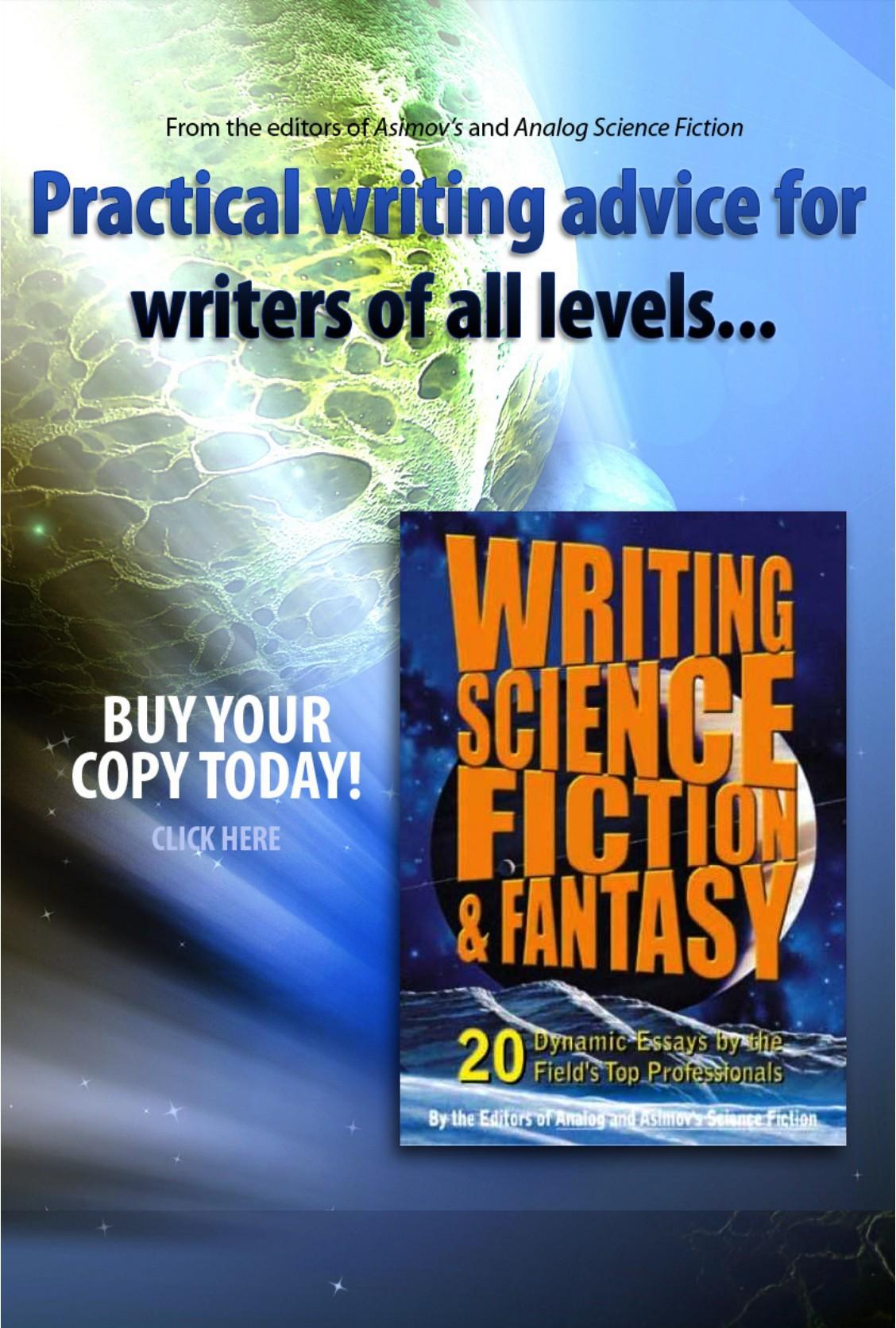
6-8—FogCon, Box 3764, Hayward CA 94540. [www.fogcon.org](http://www.fogcon.org). Walnut Creek (San Francisco) CA. K. S. Robinson. Literary SF & fantasy.

## AUGUST 2015

19-23—Sasquan, PMB 208, 15127 Main St. E., Suite 104, Sumner WA 98390. [www.sasquan.org](http://www.sasquan.org). Spokane WA. Gerrold. WorldCon. \$190.

## AUGUST 2016

17-21—MidAmeriCon II. [www.midamericon2.org](http://www.midamericon2.org). Convention Center and Bartle Hall, Kansas City MO. Kinuko Y. Craft. WorldCon. \$150.

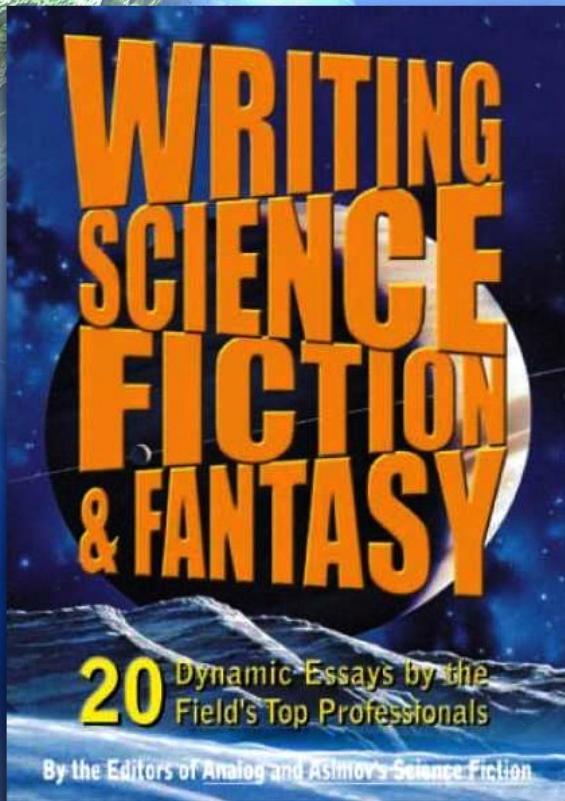


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